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"Fie, fie! unknit that threat'ning, unkind brow,
And dart not scornful glances from those eyes.
* * * * * * *
A woman mov'd is like a fountain troubled."

—*Taming of the Shrew.*

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MRS. ARTHUR.

CHAPTER I.

"IS Mr. Curtis here?" said a voice at the door.

The door was so near the sitting-room that every demand made there was easily heard, and even answered, from within; and, indeed, Mrs. Bates was in the habit of calling out an answer when it happened to be beyond the powers of the daughter or small servant who opened. But this question was one about which there was no difficulty. It was followed by a hearty laugh from the assembled family.

"I should think he was—rather!" said Charley Bates, the son; and "Ask Nancy," said Matilda, the eldest daughter.

There was a considerable number of people in the little parlor—to wit, Mr. Bates, in his big chair on one side of the fire, sipping rum-and-water, and reading a newspaper which was soft and crumpled with the usage of the day at the nearest public-house; and Mrs. Bates on the other, seated between the fireplace and the table, mending the stockings of the family. Charley was reading an old yellow novel behind his mother, and Matilda was making her winter bonnet with a quantity of materials in a large piece of paper on the table, which was covered with a red and green cloth. It was October, and not cold, but there was a fire, and a branched gas-pendant with two lights shed heat as well as light into the close little room. There was another daughter, Sarah Jane, who was coming and going about the table, now and then making incursions into the kitchen; and behind backs in the corner, on a black hair-cloth sofa against the wall, were seated the pair of lovers. No one threw any veil of doubt on the fact that they were a pair of lovers, nor did their present aspect make this at all uncertain. They were seated close together, talking in whispers; one of her hands clasped in his, his arm, to all appearance, round her waist. Matilda screened them a little, having her back turned towards them, which gave, or might have given, a sense of remoteness to the pair, and justified their too evident courtship. Otherwise they were in full light, the gas blazing upon them; and it was scarcely possible to whisper an endearment which was not audible. *She* was a pretty girl, with brown hair, brown eyes, and a pretty complexion, in a somewhat showy dress, cut very much in "the fashion," yet looking not at all out of place in the warm, crowded, stuffy parlor, full of hot air and gas, and the fumes of rum-and-water. She was Mrs. Bates's second daughter, called Nancy, but preferring to be called Anna, and engaged to a young gentleman who was a pupil of Mr. Eagles, the well-known "coach," and had been for a year at Underhayes. He had been coming after Nancy Bates all that time, and at present they were engaged, and made love in the family parlor, now that it was too cold to take long walks. Mr. Curtis preferred the walk, but Nancy liked the hair-cloth sofa. She was a good girl, and fond of her family, and she liked them to share her happiness. The family party were all moderately like each other, harmonious and happy, suiting their surroundings. There seemed nothing out of place among them—the bonnet-making, or the old yellow novel, or even the rum-and-water. But there was one great incongruity in the room, and that was the hero, the young lover, who certainly had no business there. He was dressed in an English gentleman's easy morning suit, a dress in which there is less apparent pretension than any in the world, perhaps, but which shows very distinctly the condition of the wearer. His presence in the room put the whole place out of harmony; it made the stuffy comfort look squalid and mean; it rebuked the family ease and cheerfulness, the absence of all disguise, the frank family union. In his person another element came in, a something higher, which made all the rest more low. He was not the sort of person to sit with his arm round his *fiancée* in public, within reach of papa's rum and mamma's joke. All the rest went perfectly well together, but he put everything in the wrong.

And the effect which he himself produced to every beholder, or would have produced had there been any beholders, was wrought upon himself by the sound of this voice at the door. It was a voice of modulation and tone different from anything here. Even his Nancy, though he was so much in love with her, young Curtis felt suddenly jarred and put out of tune by it: he dropped her hand instinctively, and got up confused, a sudden flush coming over his face.

"It is some one for me," he said, in sudden embarrassment. And again the family laughed more loudly than before.

"Any child could tell that, seeing as he's just asked for you," said Mrs. Bates; "and I'm sure any friend of yours is welcome. Find a chair

for him, girls, if there is any chair free of your falals; and show him in, Sarah Jane."

"I think not; if you will excuse me, I'll go to him," said the young man, hastily. "I might bring him—if you are so kind—another time."

"There's no time so good as now," said Mrs. Bates. "Don't be shy, don't be shy, my dear. You don't like him to find you with Nancy; but, bless my soul, the time won't be long that any one will see you without Nancy—"

"Oh," said Nancy herself, saucily, "if he's ashamed of *me*—"

"Ashamed of you, darling! as if that was possible!" said the young man, stooping to whisper to her; "but it is a man, a college friend—I must go."

While he stood thus explaining, with an anxious face, and his Nancy pouted and tossed her pretty head, the stranger suddenly appeared at the open door.

"This way, this way!" Sarah Jane had cried, delighted by the advent of another gentleman, and already wondering why Nancy should have all the luck, and whether one wedding might not bring another.

The new-comer was tall; he was short-sighted, with a pucker on his forehead, and a glass in his eye. He stood in the door, and hazily regarded the scene, not penetrating it, nor finding out his friend for the moment; but gazing somewhat vaguely, dazzled besides by the sudden light, into the small crowded space and the group of strange faces.

"Ah, there you are, Curtis," he said at last, with a gleam of recognition; then turned to Mrs. Bates with an apology. "I hope you will forgive such an intrusion. I had a commission to Curtis, and I did not understand—I did not know—"

"Come in, sir, come in," said Mrs. Bates; "don't think of apologies—we're very glad to see you. Sit you down, sir; and if you've just come off a journey, say what you would like, and it shall be got for you—a drop of beer, or a cup of tea, or a glass with my good gentleman. You see he's making himself comfortable. And supper's coming in about an hour. You can hurry it up a bit, Sarah Jane," cried the hospitable mother, "if the gentleman has just come by the train."

"Thank you," said the stranger, sitting down on the chair that had been cleared for him; "nothing to eat or to drink, thanks—you are too kind; but I may wait till Curtis is ready. I have got something for you, Arthur," he said, turning again to his friend.

"Oh, have you?" said Curtis, dropping back upon the sofa beside his Nancy, as there was nothing else to be done; but he did not take her hand again, or resume his former position. He sat very stiff and bolt-upright, withdrawn from her a little; but young men and young women do not sit together behind backs for nothing, notwithstanding the gas-light; and his air of withdrawal took an aspect ridiculously prudish, and called attention. The family Bates looked curiously at the stranger, and he looked curiously at them. Neither was much acquainted with the *genre* of the other, and on both sides there was a half-hostile interest which quickened curiosity. But Matilda and Sarah Jane were not hostile. Their curiosity was warm with benevolence. If Nancy had done so well for herself, why not they too? He had dropped into their hands like a new prey. Their eyes brightened, the energy of enterprise came into their faces. A gentleman is a fine thing to girls of their condition, far finer in promise than in reality. The appearance of a second quarry of this kind turned their heads. Why should it not fall to one of them?

"You must have found it cold travelling, sir," said Matilda, wrapping up her bonnet in the paper. "October nights get chilly, don't they? and Underhayes is a miserable little place if you have come from town."

"I have come from the country," said the stranger, with his short-sighted stare. He was slightly annoyed, to tell the truth, to hear it so clearly set down that he must have come from town. Did he look like a man to come from town in October?—not thinking that town meant everything that was splendid in Matilda's eyes.

"Chilly!" cried Sarah Jane, eager to recommend herself. "I'm sure the gentleman thinks this room a deal too hot. Shouldn't you say so, sir? I can't abide it, it gives me such a headache."

"Come, girls, you needn't quarrel," said Mrs. Bates, in her round, good-humored voice. "We'll allow you your different ways of thinking. Your papa likes a warm fireside, don't you, Bates? But I suppose the gentleman comes straight from the beauty and fashion, as it says in the newspapers."

"Talking of the newspapers, sir," said Mr. Bates, putting down his, "what do you think of the present crisis? What's things coming to? There's Rooshia threatening in the East; and as for your Khedivys and that sort, I don't believe in them. We'll all be in a precious hobble if we don't look out, as far as I can see."

"There, there, Bates, none of your politics!" cried his wife; "once begin that, and nobody can get in a word—and the gentleman is just off a journey."

Young Curtis sat uneasily while all this went on, like a dog in leash, watching his opportunity to start. The sudden insight which had come to him with the entrance of his friend upon this scene was strange, and very painful. He was very much in love, poor young fellow; and when a man is in love, it is curious how easily he can accept the circumstances of his beloved and find them natural. Matilda and Sarah Jane had only amused him before, as, indeed, they amused the new-comer now; but the family changed its aspect entirely as the young man, who was almost a member of it, realized to himself how it must appear to his friend, and saw the whole scene, as it were, through Durant's eyes. Durant's eyes, however, staring vaguely upon this slowly comprehended new world, did not see half so clearly or so sharply as Arthur's saw through them. He gave double force and meaning to the other's observations, and beheld through him many things which the other did not see. Fortunately—and how fortunate that was Arthur did not venture to say to himself—Nancy, who was affronted, did not open her mouth. He adored her, and yet he was glad she was affronted, notwithstanding the pain it gave him. He could not bear to vex or alienate her for a moment, and yet he was thankful not to be obliged to see

her too with his friend's eyes. But he saw all the rest, and the *ensemble* of the room, the village flirt, Sarah Jane, and the lout Charley, and Mr. Bates with his slippers, and felt how stuffy it was, and the smell of the rum. His endurance had come to a climax when Mr. Bates began to talk a little thickly of politics. Once more he sprung to his feet.

"I know Durant has something to say to me," he cried. "I think I must ask you to excuse me to-night, Mrs. Bates. Everything must give way to business."

"Lord bless you, my dear, not of an evening," said the genial woman. "Don't ye go. Supper's coming. You know all our ways, and I dare say your friend—Mr. Durant is it? and how do you do, Mr. Durant, now I know you?—I dare say he'll put up with us for your sake. Go you and hurry the supper, Sarah Jane."

"We'll have to go, really," said poor Arthur; and he stooped to his sullen love and whispered, "Don't be angry. He comes from my father. Though I can't bear to leave you, darling, I must hear what my father says."

"Oh, indeed, your father!" said Nancy. "I see what it is; it is just what I have always told you. You're ashamed of me and my folks, as soon as you get hold of one of your fine friends."

"Durant is not a fine friend, he is like my brother—he will be your friend too," whispered the young man in an agony.

But Nancy only pouted the more.

"I don't want such friends. I have got my father and my brother to see to me. You needn't bring any of your fine gentlemen here."

Notwithstanding, however, the blandishments of Sarah Jane and Matilda, the stranger had risen too. He was much taller, and had a much finer figure than Arthur, the sisters thought; and he smiled, though his look was rather vague, staring as if he did not see them.

"You are very kind," he said, holding out his hand to Mrs. Bates, who hastened up to her feet, too, to shake it with great cordiality. "I hope you will kindly repeat your invitation for another day, and that Arthur will bring me back when I can take advantage of your hospitality; but I must not come among you under false pretences," he added, laughing, "for I know nothing about the rank and fashion—that is in Arthur's way rather than mine."

"Oh, sir," said Mrs. Bates, bowing, "we know what gentlemen means when they speak in that high-minded way."

This speech was such a triumph of genial mystification and confidence that Durant stared still more, and hurried forth reduced to silence, feeling himself unable in his present puzzled condition to cope with such an intellect. Poor Arthur, trying to seize the hand of his beloved, trying by piteous looks to move her from her sullen offence, lingered a moment, but in vain.

"Never mind her," said Mrs. Bates; "she will come to when you are gone. It'll all come right to-morrow. Good-night, and God bless you! I'll see to Nancy; and you needn't keep the door open and me in a draught," she added, querulously, "if you won't stay."

This quickened the steps of the lover; but though he was glad to get outside, and to leave the glare and odors of that room—so long his bower of bliss, so suddenly revealed to him in its real aspect—blown away, it is impossible to say how miserable he was at such a parting from the object of his love. It was she who opened the door for him on other occasions, lingered with him in the fresh evening air, and said "Good-night" a thousand times over, each time more sweetly than the time before: so at least the foolish young fellow thought. But she had not lifted her head even to give him a last glance; she had not said "Good-night!" at all; she had dismissed him with a cloud upon her face. How was he to bear it till to-morrow? and yet how glad he was that when all of them had talked and betrayed themselves, she had never brought herself under those painful disenchanting reflections from his friend's eyes.

"Good-night, Arthur," said saucy Sarah Jane; "and good-night, Mr. Durant. Be sure you bring him back to-morrow. You have promised mamma to come back to morrow and have supper with us. Good-night, Mr. Durant."

Durant replied to the "Good-night" with a suppressed laugh, and walked away into the darkness with Arthur following. Though the freshness of the night was so great a relief after the heat indoors, it was not genial, but penetrating and dull, with a shrewish touch, such as October often has; and the skies were dull with no moon, nothing but drifting clouds, and the street of the little town was not attractive. They walked on in silence together for some time, the stranger being occupied longer than was necessary in lighting his cigar; but he had no sooner managed this successfully than he threw it away again.

"Come to the inn, Arthur," he cried; "it's comfortless work talking here."

CHAPTER II.

THE inn at Underhayes was not much to speak of, but the parlor in which the two friends talked was larger than Mrs. Bates's parlor, where all the family assembled and all their existence was passed. Durant sat down at the table to consume a simple dinner—a hastily cooked chicken, which he had ordered after his journey, and which was not so savory as the supper which Mrs. Bates would have given him; nor was it so cheerful a meal. While he ate, Arthur Curtis paced back and forward at the other end of the room, which, with its bare carpet and scant furniture, was still less objectionable than the room they had left—the place where all his happiness had lain so long. Perhaps if the shock had come sooner some deliverance would have been possible, though at the cost of a heart-break; but nothing was possible now except to carry out his engagement. Lewis Durant was both honorable and high-minded, yet he had come with no better intention than to prevent his friend from keeping his word, with very little regard for the word, and none at all for the happiness, of the other person who was chiefly concerned. Happiness of a girl who had entangled a young man so much above herself! what was that to anybody? If she should be robbed of her happiness, why, was it not all her own fault? But he had not been so injudicious yet as to broach this idea; he was approaching it gradually, "acquir-

ing information" on the subject. Of course, it was natural that any one so interested in Arthur's affairs as he was should like to know all about it; and he had seen Lady Curtis herself, he did not conceal from his friend, and the anxious mother was "in a great way."

"I'd like to take up satisfactory news, old fellow," he said; "both for their sake and my own."

"What do you call satisfactory news?" said Arthur. His mind was in an unexampled commotion. His old life and his new had come into active conflict, and he himself seemed to be the puppet between them. But in the midst of the excitement caused by this bringing-back of all the habits of his former existence, the poor young fellow was miserable at the thought of having come away from his love without a kind word, without a look even, which could stand in the place of their usual Good-night.

"Well—it is difficult to speak in plain words between you and them. Of course you know that this can't be expected to give them satisfaction, Arthur. They have not been led on step by step as you have—"

"What do you mean?" he said, hastily. "Do you mean the vulgar sort of thing that every fool says—that *she* has been leading me on?"

"I certainly did not say so," said Durant. "I mean they have not been used to all the circumstances, like you. Your mind has become familiar by degrees with this family—with everything about them."

"Say it out plainly; don't mind my feelings," said the other, bitterly—"with the difference between Bates, the tax-collector's daughter, and Sir John Curtis's son. Well! and what is the difference? All on her side; all in her favor. She getting nothing but additional beauty from all her surroundings, I—doing not much honor to mine."

"I was not making any personal comparison, Arthur," said Durant, cautiously; "I was saying only—what you will fully allow—that, taken just by themselves, without that knowledge of personal excellence which I suppose you have—that the difference of the circumstances, the difference of manners—well! cannot but startle—shock, perhaps—your immediate friends."

"That means that you are shocked and startled. Mr. Bates's rum-and-water was too much for your delicate nerves," said Arthur, with a sneer; "and yet you and I have seen worse things that we were not shocked at."

"Arthur, do you want to quarrel with me? or can you suppose I should have come here, if I had felt the slightest desire or intention to quarrel with you?"

The young man did not answer for some minutes; then he threw himself into a chair by the table and concealed his face from the other's gaze, supporting his head on his hands. "Don't you think I know everything you can say?" he cried; "it is plain enough. They are not like us—there are things in them which even I don't relish. Their ways are more homely, their manners more simple, than we have been used to."

"If it was only simplicity," said Durant, shrugging his shoulders, and thinking of the blandishments of the Misses Matilda and Sarah Jane.

"Well," said Arthur, with a sudden outbreak, "call it what you like, what disagreeable name you please, and then I ask you what have you got to say to *her?* It is she I am going to marry, not her family. What have you got to say to HER? She is the person to be thought of. Old Bates is an old tax-collector, and the mother a good-natured old woman, and the sisters flirts, if you please; I don't say anything to the contrary; but what have you to say against the girl herself? What of HER?"

"Arthur, I have nothing to say; how could I? She sat behind backs, with you to screen her. I saw that she was pretty—"

"You saw that she was like a lily growing among weeds; that she was like a princess among the common people; that she behaved like the best-bred of ladies. That is what you would say, if you allowed yourself to speak the truth."

"If I speak at all, I shall certainly speak the truth," said Durant, with a sigh of impatience. To him, as to every one else, Nancy Bates had seemed only an ordinary pretty girl; nothing more.

"Then speak," said Arthur; "for if there is one assumption more intolerable than another, it is that of saying nothing with the aim of sparing your friend, as one who has nothing but what is disagreeable to say."

"You press me too hard," said Durant, smiling. "What can I say after what you have said? Arthur, this girl may be a Una, for anything I can tell—as you wish me to believe she is; but how can I know? I can see she is pretty; but I don't know her: how can I divine what her character is? She may be everything you think; but all that *I* can possibly make out is that she is a pretty girl, with sense enough to hold her tongue."

Arthur grew red and grew pale as his friend spoke; his lip curled over his teeth with a furious sneer, almost like the snarl of a dog.

"Don't you think," he said, with an enraged semblance of extreme civility, "that when you are speaking of a lady who is about to become my wife, you might speak of her by another name than that of 'the girl?'"

"By Jove, you are too good!" said Durant, half angry, half amused. "What should I say? You called her a girl yourself, and so she is; so are the princesses, for that matter."

"I call her many things which it would not become strangers to call her," said Arthur; "and I think, perhaps, on the whole, it would be better taste not to favor me with your opinion on this subject. You would not, I suppose, give me your frank estimate of my mother, for instance, whatever it might be—and it is equally unnecessary of my wife."

"As you please," said Durant, offended; and then there ensued a temporary pause, during which the stranger, driven back upon that occupation, munched a crust with indignant fervor, and Arthur sat moodily by, holding his head in his hands. It was Durant who was the first to recover himself. The man who stands in the suspicious position of adviser and reprover naturally does regain his temper sooner than the person who is advised and reproved. He said in a conciliating tone, "Why should we quarrel? I can have no right to disapprove of your choice. I am not here as the agent of your family, Ar-

thur, who might have a right to interfere, but only as your friend. I can wish nothing but what is for your good."

"For my good!" the young man said through his teeth; then he, too, smoothed himself down. "I don't want to quarrel, Durant; but if my mother thinks I am to be dictated to—or any friend of mine supposes he can come to look surprise and criticism, even if he does not say anything—"

"This is too much," said Durant, laughing; "if you are going to put meaning in my eyes which nature has denied to them, what can I say to you? I, who scarcely see anything, to look criticism, is rather too strong for a blind old mole like me!"

"Short-sighted people see a great deal more than they own," said Arthur, oracularly, "but I don't want to quarrel." And then again there was a pause.

"Answer me one thing," said Durant, reopening the question after an interval: "have you really made up your mind to marry this—lady? Is it all settled? Is there room, or is there no room, for anything I might find to say?"

"What could you find to say?"

"That is not the question," said Durant; "whatever it might be, it is unnecessary to say it if everything is settled. But, Arthur, if there is still time—if I may still once, before it is too late, speak plainly to you?"

"It is too late," said Arthur, hotly. "I am to be married in a fortnight; I should be married to-morrow if I could. Supposing you had the finest arguments in the world, and the best reasons against it, do you think I would break her heart and my own for your reasonings? Yes, it *is* all settled, and nothing on earth can change it."

He got up as he spoke, and marched about the room with an air of defiance. Then he came back to where his friend was sitting, and sat down on a corner of the table, swinging his legs.

"All the same," he said, with a laugh of affectation and bravado, "I'd like to hear what you have to say against it. It might be novel and amusing, perhaps."

"I have not the slightest desire to be amusing."

"Oh, impressive, then—that is as good or better; impressive, eloquent! Let us hear, Durant. I should like a specimen of the grand style you keep for your most serious cases."

"Yours is not one of them," said Durant, calmly; "yours is simple enough. Don't let us go farther, Arthur; we should come to blows again, and that would not answer my purpose, nor yours either."

"Then you refuse to tell me what, of course, you came here to say. Your plea cannot be very powerful this time, nor your brief worth much," said Arthur, with a pretence at scorn which was full of aggravation. This stirred his friend more than anything yet had done.

"My brief," he said, "was not prepared as most briefs are. It seems to me that you are not worthy even to hear of it. 'Prove the culprit guilty' is what most briefs enjoin, but this one was, 'Prove him innocent; let his very judges see him to be right, and not wrong.' These were my instructions; they do not much resemble your notion of them, nor do they deserve to be received in this way."

Arthur rose again from his seat, and walked about the room, restless and uncertain.

"Say what you have to say," he said; "I will not interrupt you. Let me hear it all."

"I have already told you that if everything is settled and your mind made up, it would be foolish to go on at all. If there is any hope, I will speak. Arthur," said Durant, suddenly, "you are very fastidious—very difficult to please in ordinary cases. Do you think you will be able to live with the good people we have seen to-night?"

"Why should I live with them? They have nothing to do with it. A wife comes with her husband. *They*, whatever they may be, are quite outside the question. She is to be thought of, and she alone."

"Have you ever reflected, Arthur, that if *she*—the lady—is as noble a character as you think, she will not give up her own people for you or any one? I should not care to have a woman do that for me. I think she would have good reason to judge me severely after, if I failed in threefold duty to her. You should be father and mother in such a case—and husband too."

"And so I mean to be, so I am! What are father and mother to me now? I have formed a tie which is beyond all these mechanical, understood ties, in which there is no choice on the child's part; and she will feel as I do."

"Women don't always do that," said Durant; "and I, for one, don't like them when they do. Suppose, for the sake of the argument, that she did not, what should you do then? It is worth taking into consideration."

"She would be sure to do what was best; and if that is all, we can easily baffle your cross-examination, Durant. You are not good at bullying witnesses," said Arthur, his heart rising in spite of him. "Ask me something more difficult than this."

"You would have to live," said the other. "I don't think that is more difficult, but you may not be of my opinion. How are you to live? upon your allowance, which has never been too much for you alone?"

"Two spend no more than one," said the catechumen, recovering his spirits; "and she is not a spendthrift like me. She has been trained to make a little go a great way. She will reduce my expenses instead of increasing them."

"Yet two eat more than one, to put it on the simplest ground."

"Eat! that is like you, Durant. How little you know about it! Is it on eating one spends one's money? So far as that goes, you may say what you please. There is nothing in *you*, old fellow, to frighten any one. Come, I forgive your objections to my happiness when I see how little you have got to say."

"You are sure, then, entirely sure, that it is your happiness, Arthur?" Durant rose, and put his hands on his friend's shoulders, looking down upon him with a face full of emotion. "You have been the nearest a brother of anything I ever knew—brother, or sister, or both together. Are you sure, boy, are you sure? Happiness is a sacred thing. I would not touch it, I would not harm it. Are you sure?"

"As sure as that I love her, Durant."

The elder man dropped his hands from the other's shoulder, and turned away with a sigh. Whether it was the half-inspired look which at that moment came into Arthur's face, or the resemblance of that face to another, or the superiority over himself of this boy whom he had been lecturing, and whom he had lectured so often — whatever it was, he turned away, with something that made his sight more uncertain than ever rising in his eyes.

"Then I can't say anything to you," he said, in a voice tremulous with feeling. "I can say nothing to you! I would not meddle with that, right or wrong, were it to cost me mine."

"Yours, old fellow?" cried Arthur, in the effusiveness of victory. "Hurrah for love! It's the thing worth living for. Are you in Arcadia too?"

Durant did not make any answer. He went to the window, and looked out upon the dark night and the lamps flaring, and then returned to his chair. Whatever commotion there had been in his countenance, he had got rid of it. Neither blush nor smile was on his serious face, nor any further manifestation of sympathy. Arthur looked at him, and burst into excited laughter.

"You don't look much like a fortunate shepherd," he said. "Love! that was a bad guess; it was law I should have said—briefs and fees, and a silk gown at the end; that's what moves you."

"Ay, ay," said the other, vaguely; "that's what it is. Mine is not a corresponding case. You were always luckier, brighter than I, and I don't grudge it you, Arthur. Your happiness (if you are happy) will be almost as good for me as my own. But I don't think either of them very probable just now," he went on, suddenly changing his tone; "that is the fact. I am not in a good way, and, my boy, you are in a bad way. I'll say it, once for all. You are deceiving yourself. You are the last man in the world to do this sort of thing. You will repent it, sooner or later. Don't look at me as if you thought me a fool, with that supercilious face. It is you who are the fool. You are going to do what you will wish undone all the days of your life."

"Durant!" cried Arthur, furious, springing from his seat and lifting his arm as if for a blow.

His friend stood up facing him, folding his arms. His face had flushed with a momentary gleam of passion while he spoke. Now it stilled and paled again, and he stood in his superior strength, looking calmly at the slighter being whom he had roused to momentary fury. The young man's clenched fist fell by his side. He turned away angry, but subdued.

"No man in the world but you dare speak so," he said, "and even from you I will never bear it again."

"You shall not be required," said Durant, sadly. "I have said, once for all, what was in my mind. Now—I know you well enough—you'll go and do what you want to do, Arthur, and with all the more zest. And when you have paid for your happiness, and got to the bottom of it, you will come to me again."

"I think you presume a little too much on our long friendship," said Arthur, seizing his hat. "Good-night; there has been enough of this. Things will be bad indeed with me, I promise you, if, after this speech of yours, I ever come to you again."

He rushed out of the room before the other could reply. Durant went to the window, and looked after him with a wistful, subdued light of pity and tenderness in his face.

"I wonder how long it will be first?" he said to himself.

CHAPTER III.

Lewis Durant was the *ami de l'enfance* of Arthur Curtis. He had always been a little bigger, a little stronger, a little steadier, as he was a little older than his friend. He was not a young man of family, like Arthur; and Lady Curtis, who was philosophical in her tendencies, had pointed many a social criticism by the fact, laughingly commented upon, that her son's fag-master at Eton, and Mentor in life, was the grandson of the great saddler with whom Sir John and his predecessors had dealt for ages.

The Durants, who were French by origin, had made a great deal of money in that business, and one of the sons had been made a clergyman. This was the father of Lewis, who had been brought up, accordingly, in as much luxury as his friend; but unfortunate speculations on his father's part had changed all that by this time, and the young man was now fighting his way at the Bar, with very little to keep up the warfare on, and none of those supports of good connection which help the aristocratic poor to keep their heads above water.

He had a home in the depths of one of the Midland Counties, where the rector—once able to hold his own with the best of his country neighbors, and considered a very good sort of man—had fallen to the ordinary parsonic level, without any standing-ground beyond it, and not much right to high consideration on that ground. For the Rev. Mr. Durant was not a very good clergyman. It had not been the object of his life to become so, but rather to obliterate from all minds, by his luxurious living, his carriages, his conservatories, his expenditure in every way, that he was the son of the well-known saddler; as it has been that saddler's object to advance his son in life, and make him a member of the upper class by making him a clergyman.

Everybody was quite conscious of this while he was rich; but, naturally, everybody became still more conscious of it when he became poor; and as his wealth had been his chief standing-ground, and he had not much worth or goodness, and no activity, to gain him credit in his parish, the downfall was pretty nearly complete. And the woman whom he had married had been no more than a fit partner for such a man; so that when Lewis, their only child, became old enough to think of home as anything more than a jolly place to spend holidays in, the boy's refined and delicate mind had suffered a severe shock. How it was that he happened to possess a refined and delicate mind is a totally different question, and one into which we need not inquire; but the effect upon him of the ostentatious, showy, lavish, and lazy wealth, in the first instance, and of the useless, slovenly, languid poverty which followed, was remarkable enough.

A great many things go by contraries in this perverse world, and nothing more commonly than the habits of parents and children. In Scotland, it has passed into a proverb that an active mother has an indolent daughter. The insinuating and bland courtier has to struggle against the abruptness or loutishness of his son, and even virtue has very often moral weakness, if not worse, for its next descendant.

In Lewis Durant's case the contradiction was a happy one. Disgusted by the aimless leisure and nothingness of the paternal life, the young man flung himself into work with a zeal and passion seldom to be found. He had no family friends in the class he had been brought up in, and his personal friends were of his own standing, themselves too young and inexperienced to help others; but he had not cared for this; he had flung himself into the work of his profession —the Bar — for which he had been trained as his father had been trained for the Church, as the profession of a gentleman, a trade not incompatible with the possession of a great deal of money, and not requiring to be kept up by the happy man who was not obliged to work for his bread.

Perhaps the energy of the old saddler had got into the veins of Lewis, transmuted into some kind of potable gold, some elixir of force and life. If so, it had clearly "suffered a sea change into something rich and strange," for there was no greed of gold, no thirst for wealth, in the young man's mind. On the contrary, if he had not known forcibly the many good things that money can do, and which the absence of money prevents from getting done, Lewis would have hated money, so associated was it with everything that had most galled and humbled him.

But money is not a thing to be scorned, and he had too much sense and too much honesty to feign. He worked with a concentration of force and steady effort which was intensified every time he visited the aimlessness of his home. He had come from that home now, and had left it, as he always did, impatient of rest, eager to plunge again into the active warfare of life, to strain muscle and sinew, and all the powers of mind and frame.

This was the man who, since they were boys, had been Arthur Curtis's chief friend. He himself was the only son of Sir John, a true rural potentate, a man whose life was full of stolid dignity and duty, made steady—and, in a dull matter-of-fact manner, noble—by the proud sense of obligation to his country, his son, and his dependents, such as long descent and elevated position sometimes give. Sir John Curtis might sometimes be ridiculous, but he was always respectable, making an aim at his duty in a large, conscientious, stupid way, in which there was a certain obtuse grandeur. He carried this into the smallest detail of his life, and the result was, that he was held by most people to be pompous, and admired by some as the chief source of serious comedy in his neighborhood. But his life was a blurred vision, surrounded by all kinds of imperfections of a noble ideal—a thing not always perceived by his wife and his son, to whom, however, Sir John's deficiencies, on the other hand, were very plain.

And Arthur, for the time at least, was almost as contradictory of his father as Lewis was. He was light-minded and heedless, idle, foolish yet clever, generous yet selfish; the kind of young man who is always in scrapes, often in the wrong, yet rarely, or never, unbeloved. He had been idle at the University, and had not taken his degree—then had gone home for a time and had done nothing. And now this last and most serious scrape of all had been brought on, as it were, by the most virtuous resolution of his life.

It was his mother's earnest desire that he should enter public life, in one way or other; and Arthur himself had been dazzled by the chances of diplomacy, an opening into which seemed before him, and had come now, in a sudden fit of industry and virtue, to see if, by the help of a noted "coach," he could "pull through" his examinations, and get the University stamp, though late, impressed upon him. There had been no particular reason why he had not achieved that University stamp before. He was a tolerable scholar, and had meant honors, but had not been industrious enough to attain them, and had thrown up the milder standard in disgust. Thus he had come to Underhayes, intending better than, perhaps, he had ever steadfastly intended in his life; and lo! Nancy Bates was the result.

All this was in Durant's mind, as, after a troubled night, he looked out of his inn window upon a mellow sunshiny morning of true October weather, a warm yellow haze in the air, which melted into the ripe foliage below, and the mottled clouds above. The little town was embosomed in trees. It was a little more than a village, a little less than a town; and, perhaps, had become more of a suburb than either, being within the radius of London, and coming nearer to that increasing centre every day.

The metropolis and the village had been long putting forth arms of approach towards each other, and Underhayes had grown gradually larger and nearer year by year. There was still a village green in the centre of the place; but the old houses had put on new fronts, and got enlargements of various kinds, and had become the homes of London people who went to town every morning, instead of the poorish but very genteel persons who used to inhabit them. This was a great gain to the place, and made it swell and grow bigger and bigger; but at the same time it was a loss and forfeiture of all the originality, and much of the quiet beauty, and no little of the genial and graceful comfort, that had once dwelt around the green. Everybody was richer, larger, vainer; and gorgeous entertainments were given, at which there was much more expenditure but less friendliness than of old.

The City men considered themselves a great deal more intelligent, as they certainly were more knowing, than the older inhabitants—the retired captains and colonels, the widows and old maids, and solitary couples, who were now dying out in the too active air of the place. But these relics of olden days, at least, returned their scorn with interest, if they could not compete with them in other ways. Half-way between these two sections of the community stood Mr. Eagles, the great "coach," whose fame was in all the schools and all the services. He lived in an old-fashioned house with an old gate, the posts of which were surmounted by two great stone balls, and

which opened upon a bit of real avenue, and enclosed real grounds, something more than a garden. It was a genuine old house, in which a retired Cabinet minister had once lived. It was true, he had built additions to it, but they were done in good taste, and strict submission to the original style of the house, which was taken as a kind of homage to the antique and Conservative class by that class itself. He had a large house, and he took pupils; but yet it was nothing like a school, for the young men did not live with him—no one but young Mr. Curtis, who was not to call a pupil, who was "reading" for his degree, and who was a young man of excellent family and an acquisition to any society. Arthur, indeed, in his own person, was one of the chief conciliatory circumstances which made the old inhabitants on the green tolerate and receive Mr. Eagles, whom the new inhabitants looked upon with respect as a man who had made his way.

The little inn in which Durant had passed the night was opposite the gate-way with the stone balls. Underhayes was not enough of a place to have a good inn. People who frequented inns had no object in going there. It was not far enough from London, nor near enough; and there were no exceptional attractions, as in Kew or Richmond. Therefore, amidst all the changes and improvements, The Red Lion was just what it had always been, a homely place with a sign-board standing out upon the edge of the green, and a bench, shaded by trees, where its homely customers could sit and drink their beer. And on the other side of the green stood Mr. Eagles's gate, breaking the high wall in which his house and its grounds were enclosed, and from whence there burst, in autumn richness of color, over the wall a rich border of trees.

Durant got up in much doubt and discomfort of mind after a restless night. He went out into the soft breezy air, which was warm, yet not quite free of the crispness of a first threatening of frost. Spruce men were passing on all sides, well brushed and neat, with daintily rolled umbrellas, with light great-coats, sometimes with a book or a bundle of letters to read in the train, going to business—all walking with air alert that spoke of a definite aim, and the preoccupation of something to do—which did not interfere, however, with a genial readiness to hear or report the last piece of gossip. Many of them had choice flowers in their coats, a touch of the poetry which means luxury rather than taste, with which to sweeten the office and show the skill of their respective gardeners.

All this was new to Durant, who knew nothing about the ways of the city, though he acknowledged with respect the air of work and serious occupation which called forth his sympathy, though it did not take the form with which he was acquainted. He watched them passing, going to the train; and then was conscious of the lull and desertion of the green—the momentary pause, half of regret, half of relief, at the departure of all this activity; and then the rising of the second more tranquil wave of movement—the tradespeople's carts and messengers, the butcher and baker setting out on their rounds. How many little worlds like this, each complete in its own conceit, were rushing on and on, unconscious each of its neighbor!

But he certainly had no time for those *banales* reflections, occupied as he was with painful considerations as to whether he could still do anything or say anything to justify his mission here. What could he do or say? Arthur had left him in high dudgeon—offended, apparently, beyond redemption. He was not so much disturbed by this as he might have been; for he knew Arthur, and that it was not in his nature to quarrel permanently, however angry he might be for the moment. But the question was, whether he could do anything independent of Arthur, upon whom he did not feel that his influence for the present would be very weighty? He thought, with a smile, of the recorded proceedings in a similar case, the steps taken by the protectors of another Arthur—for where but in fiction can such difficulties find their readiest parallel? But Durant had no standing-ground on which to emulate the masterly tactics of Major Pendennis, though the example occurred to him seriously. No; the position of Arthur Curtis had not been exaggerated, nor was there any glamour of false light about the subject which he could dispel. He was very much puzzled, very doubtful and anxious. He could not leave the place without attempting something more—but what was he to do?

His thoughts were thus occupied when he saw the gates opposite to him open hastily and some one come out—a small resolute man, with peremptory short steps and a dogmatical bearing. Durant felt at once that this was Mr. Eagles, and that he was coming towards him; and there was an air of vexation still more decided than his own on the brow of the famous tamer and trainer of "men." He came across the green at a rapid pace.

"Mr. Durant, I presume? My name is Eagles," he said. "I hope you have brought some light with you on a most difficult subject. What is to be done with this boy?"

"You mean Curtis?"

"Yes, I mean Curtis. Nothing in the least like it has ever happened among my pupils before. I feel my establishment disgraced by it—*disgraced*, Mr. Durant. So utterly abominable an example! I don't, as a rule, take charge of men's morals or conduct, and I heartily repent having received this one into my house. It was a silly thing for me to do; but a fellow who had been at a public school and at the University—who would have supposed he could have turned out such a fool?"

"Pardon me," said Durant, reddening, "he may have been foolish, but he is not a fool."

"Oh, if you stand up for him! I thought you had come here, as is the part of a friend, to endeavor to convince him of his folly."

"It is not so easy. Is it not the very essence of folly to think itself wiser than all its advisers?" said Durant, with a sigh. "May I ask you how you knew I was here?"

"Oh, he told me; there is a certain frankness about him. And I saw you perambulating the green, which is a thing unusual at this hour, and guessed it must be you. I wish him to go."

"To go! Curtis?"

"Yes, Curtis. I wish him to go. He is, of course, doing no good here, and the story has oozed out, equally of course. How can I tell that some other idiot may not be moved by his

example, and put himself at the feet of a sister? I shall get a bad name. I! — because your friend is a sentimental idiot."

"Patience!" said Durant, laughing in spite of himself. "I don't see how any one can blame you."

"Nor I; but they will," said Mr. Eagles. "Of all foolish and unreasonable persons on the face of the earth, parents are the most unreasonable. You must take your man away."

"But he is not my man. I have no authority over him."

"You are his friend, and you seem to have some sense, and you know his father. This is my ultimatum—you must take your man away. I have no time to say any more. Good-morning, Mr. Durant. I like promptitude, and I expect you to act at once upon what I say."

CHAPTER IV.

Durant felt that after this shock he needed a little quiet, to re-establish him in his former thoughts. Mr. Eagles had assailed him like a charge of cavalry. He laughed, yet he was shaken. It was not in his power to take away his man; indeed, he was in the most uncomfortable position possible—supposed to hold an official position in respect to Arthur, and, indeed, endowed with powers of remonstrance and reproof, but with no authority—the most difficult of all circumstances. He could neither take away his man, nor even oblige that man to hear reason, and yet he was more or less responsible for him; and, to crown all, his man had quarrelled with him, and shaken off even the ties of affection which had hitherto bound them.

This, it is true, did not affect him so much as it might have done had he been less familiar with Arthur, who he knew could never stand out or maintain the separation. To be sure, Arthur, backed up by a new family, and with the possible evil animus of "a set of women" added to his personal offence, was a person as yet unknown to his friend; and though Durant was kind, and did not think evil of others, yet he was not able to divest himself of the natural prepossession against the "set of women" whose ideas henceforward must, more or less, inspire Arthur.

It is a compliment, at least, to the mental power of women that this is the first thought that springs into any one's head when a man makes, or is understood to be about to make, an unsuitable marriage. The man may be wiser, cleverer, infinitely of more importance than the woman as a moral being; but the whole inspiration of his conduct is instantly believed to be *hers*.

Durant had not a notion what was the mental calibre of Nancy Bates. On the surface, of course, it could only be taken for granted that a member of the educated classes, a University man, would count for more than an untaught girl, the daughter of ignorant people. But nobody thinks so, and Durant was like every one else. He began to wonder what sort of people the Bateses were, and finally determined to go and see them, according to the invitation of last night. He might as well feign a little, even with this admirable motive, and show himself friendly by way of being as unfriendly as possible. He was not quite sure of the moral grandeur of the proceeding.

Take it all in all, indeed, the effort to seduce Arthur from his allegiance before their very eyes, so to speak, to beguile him into breaking his word and renouncing his plighted faith, was not, on the surface, a highly moral proceeding. But yet Durant, when he came, had been unable to conceive anything more desirable than this. If he could only have succeeded in persuading Arthur to do it, it would not only have left no weight on his conscience, but he would have felt that he had done well. The girl herself? What of the girl herself? She was a gambler, playing for high stakes. As for feeling on her part, who was at all likely to take that into consideration? Certainly when Lewis Durant did not (and it never occurred to him), it was extremely unlikely that any one else would.

This thought, however, having got into his mind, he resolved on carrying it out. He would go and see these people, and find out whether anything could be done with them, and again (with a smile) he thought of Major Pendennis and his most successful negotiations. These were the tactics the major adopted, and they had proved excellently adapted for the purpose. The circumstances, however, were evidently different. Nothing could be said of Arthur Curtis, unless his friend was prepared to lie in his behalf, which would shake the confidence of the girl's family in the advantages of the marriage. He was Sir John's only son, the estates were entailed, there was but one sister to share even the personal property of the family, and Lady Curtis was very well off in her own right. Anything that could be said would only make the Bates family more certain that Nancy had done an admirable thing for herself; so admirable that nothing should be allowed to stand in her way. Howsoever the lover's friends might object, nothing could be done to do away altogether with the advantages of the marriage, and Durant felt that the family would be fools indeed to allow any meddler like himself to affect their action in the matter.

Still, people are fools now and then, notwithstanding the strong hold of self-interest, and might be beguiled into a false step, notwithstanding that every inducement was on the other side. All this passed through Durant's mind, and he did not blush at the thought. It seemed to him quite justifiable, nay, laudable. It was to save Arthur: if he could save Arthur by deceiving others, what then? And as for the girl! Talk of hearts, if you please, in other conditions of life, but the heart of a village girl who beguiles a gentleman into falling in love with her! Honest, honorable, and true as he was, Durant, strangely enough, had still no compunction there. Could he have broken Arthur's troth-plight like a wand, he would have been delighted with himself.

He did not know his way very well, having threaded a number of small dark streets, in the rain, the night before, led by the vague directions of various officious guides; but he had a notion in which direction it was, and he had abundance of time before him. He had not gone very far, indeed, before he met an individual who might

easily have guided him, and whom he passed with a curious consciousness that there would be the most vulnerable member of the family—no less a person than Mr. Bates himself; a little stout man in a large white neck-cloth, with a book in his hand, and an appearance of ink-spots about him, which betrayed the existence of what is euphemistically called writing materials somewhere about his person. The expression of his face was not less characteristic of his profession. No softening atmosphere of rum was about him now. His face was red, probably from those long-continued though moderate evening indulgences, and his lips were pursed up and tight. He looked the kind of man whose proceedings would be summary, who would take no excuses, who would be rigid as fate in the punctuality of his applications.

Durant watched him furtively from the other side of the street; and the conclusion to which he came was that Mr. Bates, though obdurate with his district, would be incapable of standing an assault from any one of superior condition; and, however arbitrary he might be to a defaulter in rates, would not venture to withstand a Sir John, should he demand the sacrifice of his Iphigenia. Should he approach him at once, thus unprotected, in the middle of his duties, and frighten him into a promise to shut his doors upon Arthur?

For a moment Durant hesitated; for, in the first place, he was not Sir John, and, in the second place, he distrusted the power of the tax-gatherer to contend with "those women." To subdue the women themselves was a more desperate piece of work, but it would be more effectual were it done. With this conclusion, he went on making his way in the direction which he supposed the right one. He would not awaken curiosity by inquiring, and he had abundant time, as it was still early. The forenoon was bright and genial, but the place was very quiet. The men had been swept out of it by the morning train.

Except Mr. Bates, and the butchers and bakers, and a stray parson of the High-church sect, who blocked out a large piece of sunshine with his cassock and cloak, there was no one visible, for it was too early for the female population to leave the business of their houses. He was sure to find all the females of the Bates family, he thought, in the stuffy little parlor, with probably some preparations for dinner going on side by side with the bonnet-making. And the heroine, what might she be doing?—not seated on the sofa, nor love-making, he hoped; the bonnet was better than that. He made several little pictures of her in his imagination, now standing upon her dignity as engaged to a gentleman, putting on a multitude of little airs, lording it over her sisters. No doubt this was how she would show her success. He knew nothing whatever about Nancy; but as his object was to destroy her hopes, he represented her to himself, unconsciously, as affected by the very poorest version possible of these hopes. It was natural. While, however, he was pursuing these thoughts and his way together, he suddenly encountered, coming round a corner, one of the sisters whom he had met on the previous night. They came so suddenly upon each other, that both paused, with the slight shock of almost personal contact.

"Oh, Mr. Durant!" cried Sarah Jane.

She blushed "to be caught" in her cotton frock and shabby hat, running out in the morning—not such was the apparel in which she would have chosen to be seen by a gentleman—but Sarah Jane was a born flirt, and even her frock did not subdue her. She would not lose the opportunity. And, to tell the truth, the cotton frock was much more becoming, had she known it, than the cheap travesties of "the fashion" which she generally wore.

"I am very glad to have met you, Miss Bates," he said. "I was trying to find the way to your house."

"Oh la!" said Sarah Jane, her eyes dancing. This was something to the purpose, for why should he come to the house so soon but for *some reason?* And it could not be Matilda. "But I ain't Miss Bates—I'm the youngest," she said. "If you'll just come two or three steps down this street first, I'll show you the way. I've got some ribbon to match—look here, Matty's new Sunday bonnet—but I sha'n't be a moment, and I'll show you the way."

Durant consented; it seemed to him the best chance he could have had of acquiring information. He turned and walked down the street by the side of the girl, who was half wild with pride and pleasure. She could see one or two faces glance out through shop-windows with surprise and envy. To be seen walking along the street with such a gentlemanlike-looking man! There was nobody in Underhayes, except Arthur, who looked so distinguished, not even Colonel Hooker, who was supposed by everybody to be the glass of fashion. This was a delusion of fancy on Sarah Jane's part, for Durant's appearance was nowise remarkable; but as life is but thought, the idea was quite as good to her as if it had been true.

"I go all the messages," said Sarah Jane. "I think it is very hard, especially as the girl is there, doing next to nothing; but they say they can't trust the girl. Girls *are* very queer; they are not to be depended upon, I am sure—the tronble mamma has with ours!"

They had not kept a girl very long, and Sarah Jane was still a little proud of it, as of a sign of social distinction. She turned to her new friend for sympathy, though reflecting, as she did so, that probably he was living in lodgings, and had not in his own person either the pride or the difficulty of managing a servant of any kind.

"Yes," said Durant, "I agree with you, Miss Bates. Girls, so far as I have seen them, are very queer."

"Ain't they?" cried Sarah Jane, relieved as to his circumstances, of which a momentary doubt had crossed her mind; "never to be relied on, and eating, ma says, as much as any two of us. So I go to the shops. I don't mind it, generally; and then, if I didn't go, who would? Matilda has no eyes. She never sees when a thing doesn't match; and Nancy, you know, she's always either with Arthur, or doing something for him. I dare say he's there now."

"Is he there all day? That must be rather a bore for you."

"That's what I always say, Mr. Durant. I dare say Nancy may like it, for of course he is her young man; but we can't do a thing like we used, with him always there. I wish to good-

ness gracious they were married. Our parlor is a very nice room, but it's too small to have these two continually there. Mamma always will call it a parlor, though drawing-room is so much better."

"I prefer parlor."

"Do you, now? how funny! All our friends say drawing-room, though I think, after all, they oughtn't to, as we take our meals there. It is such a trouble running in and out from one room to another, and keeping up two fires. At least, I should not think it a trouble, but mamma does. She likes her old-fashioned ways. Will Arthur be very rich, Mr. Durant, and will he be a baronet when his father dies?"

"He will certainly be a baronet when his father dies."

"What luck for Nancy!" cried Sarah Jane; "and she met him just by chance, you know, as I might meet—any one in the street." She had intended to say "you," but paused in time. "When old Aunt Anna died, it was her she left everything to—all her funny old dresses, and her money. Perhaps you did not know that she was the rich one? People say it is a shame, and that Matilda should have got it, as she is the eldest; but Matilda isn't so kind as Nancy. I should not have got any good of it if Matilda had been the heiress. But fancy! when Nancy gets a dress for herself, she always gets one for me too; so I am just as well off as though the money were mine."

"That is very kind of Miss Bates," said Durant, not seeing how to find his way through all this prattle, and a little impatient of the long détour.

"She is not Miss Bates; she's the second, next to me; and I think—if you will not tell any one—that when she marries Arthur, who is rich, she will give up her legacy. I don't know if it will be to me; I wish it might be to me—not that I should keep it all to myself; but it is so nice to have it all in one's hands, and make the rest feel under obligations to you. Don't you think it is very nice? Especially Matilda. I should like to say to her, 'Matilda, dear, shouldn't you like a new bonnet?' Oh, what fun it would be! and her looks, between wanting the bonnet and not wanting to have it from me."

"It would be amusing, no doubt," said Durant; "but do you think it is quite sure that Mr. Curtis will be so rich? I should think it would be better for your sister to keep her money, for she will have a great many expenses."

"Oh, you nasty, unkind, mean—that's not what I was going to say," cried Sarah Jane; "but, dear me, you told me yourself Arthur was rich! Ain't he a baronet's son? What does he want with her little bit of money? I should be ashamed, myself, of taking money with my wife when I didn't want it, if I was a rich gentleman. I call that mean."

"But perhaps Mr. Curtis is not so rich as you think," said Durant. "His father is not an old man; there is no reason why Sir John should not live for twenty years or more."

"Twenty years or more!" cried Sarah Jane, turning upon him eyes that were full of dismay. She stopped short in the street to turn round and fix upon him her alarmed gaze. "Do you mean to say that Nancy—do you mean to tell me that Arthur—? But that would be no better than marrying any one else. Just Missis, like everybody! Why, Nancy—Nancy will never give in to that."

"I thought that probably you were deceiving yourselves," said Durant, with some complacency, wondering at this depth of ignorance, indeed, but extremely pleased with himself for having divined it, and thus finding a means of working. "Miss Nancy, if she marries Mr. Curtis, will be plain Missis, as you say, for all the world as if she had married the grocer at the corner."

"Oh, the grocer! That is what she is never likely to do," cried Miss Sarah Jane, with a conscious look towards the corner. The grocer was standing at the door in his apron—a good-looking young man, whose eyes were fixed, as Durant saw with some amusement, on himself, and with a decidedly hostile look. Miss Sarah Jane gave him a nod of airy fascination across the street. Perhaps but for this conversation she would not have been so gracious. Durant perceived that he himself was being presented in the light of a possible rival to the young tradesman, of whom he had spoken so lightly, and it was all he could do to keep his gravity in this very novel and unexpected conjuncture. He made an effort, however, and went on.

"You must know," he said, "that an independent poor man like that very good-looking grocer—"

"Oh, poor! none so poor! He is better off than many folks that make a deal more show," said Sarah Jane.

"That is precisely what I was going to say. An independent man in his position may be really in much better circumstances than the son of a more important person. Sir John Curtis is not a man to be trifled with," Durant went on, with a momentary half-amused compunction for this cruel slander upon poor Sir John. "He is stern in his own views; he is capable of withdrawing his son's allowance altogether if he is dissatisfied with his marriage. I am very sorry to alarm you, but I feared you might be under some delusion, and this was what I wanted to say."

Sarah Jane's eyes had been growing wider and wider with alarm and wonder. She turned round upon her heel as upon a pivot.

"Now I think of it," she said, "Matilda had better come and match her ribbon herself. It is only for the strings, and the bonnet is not more than half done—and, please, come and tell all this to mother yourself. Nancy's a dear," said the girl, with a look which entirely changed her aspect to her sympathetic companion. "She may have her faults, but she's always been kind, and I can't bear that she should be deceived. Come and tell it to them at home. Mother knows a deal—she's cleverer than any of us; *she'll* know if you're right or wrong; but I won't have Nancy put upon, not," cried the girl, with a vehemence of regard which only the strongest asseveration could justify—"not if I was never to have another new dress for years and years!"

CHAPTER V.

THE unlikely pair retraced their steps rapidly, turning towards the house of the Bateses; but the effect of Durant's revelation soon died off

from the mind of Sarah Jane. She had done what duty required in taking him at once to her mother. Once told to that supreme authority, Sarah Jane felt that her mind was clear of all responsibility, and, indeed, as a matter of fact, she dismissed the burden of this new revelation long before her companion ceased his efforts to impress it upon her. She tried what she could to beguile him into lighter talk; she broke in upon him with lively observations, and little essays of friendly familiarity. The momentary agitation of sympathy which had almost interested Durant in her died away. She began to pout as he went on.

"Oh, please don't talk forever about Arthur; I ain't in love with Arthur, though Nancy is. I think you might find another subject," she said. "They make a deal too much of him at home: I think, and so does Matilda, that there are nicer-looking and as gentlemanlike-looking in Underhayes as he is. What do you think of Underhayes, Mr. Durant? Is not it a pretty little place? If I had my choice I would live in London, and every night of my life I'd go to a dance or to the play. I don't pretend to be good, as some girls are. I shouldn't go about among the poor, or sing in church. What I'd like, would be to go to a party every night, or else to the play."

"I should think you would soon be tired of that," said Durant; "fashionable people get quite worn out. They get pale and colorless, not fresh and blooming, like you."

"Oh," cried Sarah Jane, feeling that this was the kind of talk in which she shone, "tell me about fashionable people, Mr. Durant. Are they a great deal prettier than we are? I suppose they look so, with all their grand dresses; but I should not care to catch people by dress, and make them think me good-looking when I wasn't; I would much rather look what I am, and then nobody would be deceived."

"You could have no inducement to look anything but what you are," said Durant, amused, giving this young savage, since she asked for it so plainly, the gewgaw of compliment which she wanted. Sarah Jane brightened and colored and bridled with pleasure. Let Nancy fare as she might, here was an immediate advantage her sister could have, without any evil effect on Nancy's future.

"Oh, you are just like all the gentlemen," she said, "always paying compliments. If the girls were not a deal more sensible than you think, you would turn our heads. But if there is one thing I despise, it is the silly girls that believe everything that is said to them. A little experience teaches you better than that," said Sarah Jane.

"And what does experience teach Miss Bates," said Durant, suppressing his laugh.

"I told you before I was not Miss Bates; I am Miss Sarah Jane. Some people don't think it very pretty, but I will never be ashamed of my name. Is it true that they go to five or six parties in a night, one after the other? I should not like that; where I am enjoying myself I like to stay. If it was dull, perhaps it would be a good thing to try another. But fancy a ball being dull! It is, I suppose, for the old wallflowers that don't dance; but I think a ball heavenly. Don't you think so, Mr. Durant? I have been at three—the Volunteers' ball, and the—two others that you wouldn't know about; and I nearly danced my shoes to pieces at all the three."

"It was natural, then, that you should enjoy them," said Durant.

"Yes, wasn't it? I never would miss one if I could help it. Now Nancy was so foolish she never went at all, but started out for a long walk with Arthur just as we were going. Wasn't it silly? I think she was sorry, though, next day, when she heard us talking of it and counting our partners, Matilda and me. A girl may be going to be married without giving up all her pleasures. But Nancy is a deal too good; I believe she would not mind giving up a ball even, if Arthur was not there, to let me go."

"I am glad to hear she is so kind."

"Oh yes, she is very kind. But she wanted me to wear an old dress of aunt's, and that I would not put up with. She does not mind looking a guy herself. I danced seven waltzes straight off, without ever sitting down, but I was not tired—not a bit tired. Oh, what fun it was! I wish there was one to-night—I wish there was one every night. I could dance till six o'clock in the morning, and never tire."

"I hope, then, for your sake," said Durant, "that there are a great many balls at Underhayes."

"No, indeed. It requires to be some public thing, like the Volunteers. I have seen dances in the houses on the green; but then we were not asked, and it was dreadful to stand and look in at the windows, and hear the music. I am sure there were plenty of people there that were not a bit better than we were. That girl that teaches the little Smithards—a bit of a governess. Mamma said it was ridiculous having her, and not us—a little bit of a governess! Now *we* have never been required to do anything for our living. We have always been kept at home, and have had everything we wanted. That makes a deal of difference; don't you think it does, Mr. Durant?"

"I am not very clever in such subjects. I have to work very hard for my living, Miss Sarah Jane."

"Have you, now? I should not have thought it, you look so like a gentleman. I suppose it is the clothes," said Sarah Jane, thoughtfully. "But even then," she added, with magnanimous indulgence, "that is quite different; men may work without losing caste, mamma says, but not women. And we have always been kept at home. I would not be a governess for the world."

"I do not suppose it can be a pleasant occupation," said Durant.

"No, indeed. What are you, Mr. Durant? You don't teach, do you? I wish you had been in the army; I do so like officers, their manners are so nice. Here we are at home already, I declare! What a pity! we have had such a nice walk. Mamma, here's Mr. Durant," she said, rushing into the little parlor; "and oh! look here, he is come to say that Arthur ain't at all rich—and that Nancy won't be my lady—and that it's all a mistake."

"What are you saying, Sarah Jane? Shut the door, can't you, and not shriek like that in the passage! should you like the girl to hear? I wonder at you, child! Good-evening, Mr.

Durant," said the mother, stiffly. She did not hold out her hand to him, or ask him to sit down, with the effusive hospitality of last night, but her daughters were more kind; Matilda lifted the paper with all her materials off the sofa to make room for him, and Sarah Jane dragged forth the most comfortable chair.

"This is the coolest place, Mr. Durant," she said. "Oh, isn't it warm here, with such a big fire? and it is quite a lovely morning, though there is a breeze; and Mr. Durant and I have had the most delightful walk!"

The former speech made the mother cold and Matilda kind; this had the reverse effect—Matilda froze and Mrs. Bates began to thaw. The gentleman who had taken a delightful walk with her youngest daughter was not a man to be frowned upon. Who could tell what might come out of such a beginning? Mrs. Bates was governed by a different code of laws from those which move the careful mothers of other spheres. She was not afraid of delightful walks, or those meetings which are not always accidental; besides, was not the stranger Arthur's friend, and consequently no stranger at all?

"I am sure it is very good of Mr. Durant to take the trouble of talking to a little scatterbrain like you," she said; "but girls will be girls; we can't put old heads on young shoulders; and, indeed, poor things, why shouldn't they be light-hearted? We haven't got much more than good spirits and good constitutions to give them, Mr. Durant."

"La, mamma! a great deal Mr. Durant must care for our spirits and our constitutions!" cried Matilda; "I dare say he has come about business, as Sarah Jane says. Was it something about Arthur, sir? But you can't tell us anything that will hurt Arthur, we are so fond of him. We would not believe any harm of him, whatever you might say."

"I have no wish to say any harm of him," said Durant. "I may claim, indeed, to have more affection for him than a stranger can have. He has been like a brother to me."

"And I am sure he is very fond of you," said Mrs. Bates; "a gentleman couldn't be fonder of another gentleman than he is of you. But, of course, you know, Mr. Durant, when people are in love they think of nothing else."

"Poor Curtis!" said Durant, unawares. It was true enough that he "was fond of" his friend; and yet, for the sake of this girl, Arthur had quarrelled even with his old companion. He felt a profound pity for him in his heart. What was he doing here, the foolish fellow, in this place, so unlike everything he had ever known?

"Well!" said Mrs. Bates, "I wouldn't say 'poor Curtis.' So far as I have seen, 'tis a happy time. After, when the cares of the world come on, and there's not means enough, or so forth, I might call 'em poor; but not just now, when everything is *couleur de rose*. And, thank Heaven! there cannot be any trouble about means with dear Arthur. Sarah Jane says you say he isn't rich: that may be, Mr. Durant. I don't look for wealth when young folks are happy together, and fond of each other. Money ain't everything, as I always tell my girls."

"No," said Durant, taken aback. "I only thought, from what Miss Bates said, that you might be deceived in respect to Curtis's true position, that was all. Of course, he has excellent prospects; but his father, Sir John, is comparatively a young man. He will flourish for the next twenty years, I hope. And as for the title, that of course—"

"Of course," said Mrs. Bates, with dignity. "And I do hope Sir John will long be spared to his family. You must not take all that a silly girl says for gospel. I think we are quite aware of Mr. Curtis's position, Mr. Bates and me. Naturally, we made inquiries. He is not rich, but he will have enough, I hope, to make a start; and my daughter has a little of her own."

"Oh, mamma, what's two hundred and fifty pounds?" said Matilda; "that's Nancy's fortune. It won't last long, will it, Mr. Durant? And Arthur hasn't got a business, or anything to help him to a living. I think it's very kind of Mr. Durant to come and tell us all this about Sir John."

"And," said Durant, pursuing his advantage, "I must speak plainly, though it may not be pleasant. Sir John is not a man to take a lenient view of anything that appears like disobedience. I do not think it likely, pardon me for saying so, that the family will like the marriage. They do not know, for one thing, the excellence of Miss Nancy."

"Oh, Nancy!" said Matilda, under her breath with a little toss of her head, and Sarah Jane laughed. Nancy was only Nancy, after all; and as for excellence, Mrs. Bates took the matter differently, as may be supposed.

"I am not going to hear any one talk disrespectful of my girl," she said. "She is as good a girl as ever breathed. I wish Sir John, or the queen herself, may have as good, and that ain't a bad wish, Mr. Durant. She is one that would do credit to any family, though I say it that shouldn't. She's pretty, and she's good, and knows her duty a deal better than most. Them that find fault with my Nancy, it's because they don't know what she is. Me and her father could tell them a different story. She never was one to go after pleasure, like the other two."

"Mamma!" said Matilda and Sarah Jane, in a breath.

"Oh yes! I know what I am saying. You are good girls enough, but you're not like your sister. You were always the troublesome ones. You'd talk and laugh with anybody. You have got no proper pride. But Nancy has always kept herself to herself. However she got to be so fond of Arthur I never could make out, for she was not one to take up with strangers; and never had any affair of the sort, nor so much as kept company with a gentleman in all her days, till she met with Arthur. Oh! my Nancy is a very uncommon girl, Mr. Durant. There are very few like her."

"I am quite ready to believe it," said Durant, proceeding on his remorseless career, though compunctions pricked him for what he was doing. "But Sir John does not know Miss Nancy. And there is Lady Curtis to be taken into consideration."

"Ah," said Mrs. Bates, subdued for the moment, "I don't deny a lady may have prejudices. I know by myself—that time when Charley was supposed to be paying attention to—you remember, girls?—oh yes! a mother is to be considered. But still, we have no reason to think La[d]

Curtis is disagreeable, Mr. Durant, or will not hear reason. The time I am talking of, about Charley—I took my measures. I got a friend of mine to speak to the girl; and I met her myself—by accident like; and, I am glad to say, it all came to nothing," Mrs. Bates added, with a sigh of relief.

"Then you perceive," said Durant, "that you felt exactly as Lady Curtis may be expected to feel."

"Yes — mothers is the same everywhere, I suppose," said Mrs. Bates, not without complacence. "A little more money don't make much difference, Mr. Durant. If it was the queen, a mother can't be more than a mother. And we're all alike, never out of anxiety one way or other—thinking of our children—a deal more than our children ever think of us," she added, shaking her head at her daughters with a sigh. "But I suppose that's the way of the world."

"Let us return to Lady Curtis," said the devil's advocate. "She, you acknowledge, is likely to be prejudiced. You understand that, judging from the feelings with which you heard of Mr. Charley's entanglement—"

"It never went so far as an entanglement. Dear, no! you must not think it was so serious."

"But this is very serious, Mrs. Bates. Curtis has settled everything to marry your daughter—so he tells me—and what will Lady Curtis think? She does not know Miss Nancy, nor you. She will think these are some designing people who have caught my son—"

At this there was a universal outcry, through which, however, Durant threaded his way with composure, notwithstanding the threatening and angry glances which surrounded him on every side.

"Designing people," he repeated, "who have caught my son. You don't suppose I think so, who know you? But Lady Curtis does not know you—and there is a certain difference between your rank and theirs. It is, vulgarly speaking, a good match for Miss Nancy. I am speaking from their point of view—this is how they *must* think of it, you know. In their rank of life, people generally meet and consult over a marriage. One man's son does not marry another man's daughter on the same level of society, without a great many consultations over it, and advances from one to the other. The young lady has to be introduced to her future husband's family, and all the steps towards the marriage are taken jointly. But there has been nothing of the kind in this case. The Curtises have not even been informed of it. They found it out by chance. Fancy, then, Mrs. Bates, what their feelings must be. They find themselves deceived and defied by their son; and they find that you are quite willing to allow him to marry your daughter without the slightest communication with his family—"

"Mr. Durant," said Mrs. Bates, whimpering, "who gave you any right to come like this and insult us? What have we done to you, that you dare to speak so? Oh! it is well seen that my husband is out, and we have no one to protect us, girls. But I say it is mean to come here in the morning, when there's no one to stand up for us, and trample upon women. I say it's a poor sort of thing to do. You daren't do it—no, he daren't do it—if your papa was here!"

"Oh, don't talk nonsense, mother!" said Matilda, "what could father do? Is he the one to take care of anybody? Mr. Durant, look here: I don't think you're anyway against us, are you? It's in kindness that you're talking, ain't it? I can't think that a gentleman would come into a house, if it was the house of poor folks, like this might be, and put on a show of being friendly—and mean different. Folks learn a great deal in this world," said the young woman, pushing away her bonnet-making, and looking at him more and more keenly with rising suspicion; "but without you owned to it, I wouldn't believe that."

"Miss Bates!" faltered Durant, rising to his feet. He grew crimson under her honest, straightforward look. It was honest and straightforward, notwithstanding that there must, he felt, have been a certain double-dealing, more or less, about Arthur; but he was in no position now to find fault with the double-dealing of others: had he not acted equivocally himself?

"I did not mean to deceive you," he said, faltering. "I did not mean to conceal from you that I was the friend of the Curtis family. I have never said I approved of the marriage. I have naturally looked upon it from their point of view."

"He never said anything different," said Sarah Jane, crying in sympathy with her mother. "He never said he was our friend. This is what he has been saying to me since ever I met him. As if nobody was ladies but those that are rich, and as if the rest of the world was dirt! as if we cared for his Curtises and his fine folks!"

"If it is on account of the family you care, Mr. Durant," said Matilda, more moderate, "it would be better if you said it straight out."

"I beg your pardon," he said, recovering himself, "it was not necessary. I am not the agent of that family—nor am I the enemy of this family. But the marriage is very unsuitable, as any man may see; it ought to be opposed. What happiness can come of it? Judge for yourselves. Curtis can't do anything for his living, as Miss Bates says; and your daughter's little money, what is it? And if they marry, they will be altogether dependent on Sir John, who does not like it—who goes further than that—hates it, and is furious with his son. He would cut him off with a shilling, if he could. But, anyhow, he can stop his allowance; he would throw them on their own resources—and then what would they do? You have always kept her at home, your daughter tells me; so that she could do nothing to help. And he could do nothing. What could he do? He has always been used to live expensively. Mrs. Bates, if you let it go on, I am very sorry for you. The most likely thing that can happen is that they will be dependent on you."

"Dependent on us!" this was such a dreadful suggestion that all lesser impulses of offence were forgotten. They gathered round him in tremulous anxiety. "You don't mean to say, Mr. Durant, that they would leave him without a penny? I am speaking to you like a friend," said Mrs. Bates, "I am not particular to ask if you meant it or not. Would they leave him without a penny?—a young man with all his extravagant ways."

"Would not you do it yourself, if you thought it would stop such a marriage?" said Durant.

CHAPTER VI.

DURANT felt that he had done a good morning's work. He had succeeded in frightening Mrs. Bates, and striking with alarm the sensible mind of Matilda and the frivolous one of Sarah Jane. He left them in different stages of perplexity and distress when he came away. They were not more selfish than other people; but the idea of Nancy's marriage, which they had been so proud of in anticipation, coming to nothing, or coming to so much worse than nothing as to throw the "young couple" on their hands, naturally appalled them. Arthur had, which, perhaps, was also natural, told them as little as possible about his family; he had slurred vaguely over all details of how he and his bride were to live. He had plenty for both, he said; there would be quite enough to give his Nancy everything her heart could desire. What could they wish for more? The daughter of a tax-collector is not usually burdened with very elaborate marriage settlements.

"I hope your papa and mamma will be pleased," Mrs. Bates had said, when she had received the intimation of the betrothal, bestowing on her future son-in-law a tearful kiss, which he bore like a hero.

"Oh, no fear of them; they will be pleased when they see Nancy," he had replied; and with this assurance she had been content.

As the time fixed for the marriage approached, no doubt there had been searchings of heart on the subject; but these were rather directed to the question, whether or not he would have any of his family asked to the wedding, than to anything more important. Arthur was four-and-twenty, surely old enough to choose for himself; and the idea of consulting the father and mother (it being evident that they were not very likely to be satisfied with the marriage) did not occur to these good folks. A young tax-collector would not think of consulting his family, though he might like them to be pleased; and why should a baronet's son, a young gentleman, much more his own master than any tax-collector, be bound to what his father and mother wished? Mr. Bates, who had a great respect for the powers that be, had, indeed, grumbled a fear that "they mightn't like it;" but "Who cares?" had been the answer of his bolder spouse. She remembered this now with a little horror.

"Your father is slow," she said to her girls; "and sometimes we're all impatient, as we didn't ought to be; but it's wonderful how often he's right, is papa."

The girls scouted the idea in words, but in their hearts they too were somewhat impressed, and the little parlor was full of agitation all the morning. Nancy was out, as the day was so fine, with her lover. They had so nearly quarrelled on the previous night that their morning meeting was more interesting than usual, and they had gone out to make it up. There was a common not far off, with stretches of gorse and little thickets of half-grown trees, which was the resort of all lovers in the neighborhood; and there they had been spending the morning in the midst of the autumnal sunshine, declaring to each other that nothing should ever come between them again, neither enemies nor friends.

Durant went home to his inn, very well pleased with himself, though with a qualm of compunction which he had not expected to feel. On the whole, these people were not designing people. They were not the harpies of the social imagination, who pounce upon the hapless *fils de famille*, and crunch his bones. That did not make them in the smallest degree more suitable to be connected with Arthur; but it made his friend a little ashamed of the part he was playing. And at the same time he was satisfied; for he did not want Arthur to make this foolish marriage, and he wanted very much to please Lady Curtis, for reasons which will be disclosed hereafter.

He felt he had done a good day's work, though perhaps it was not work of a very noble kind. He did not believe in the least that the Curtis family would sentence their son to starvation or to be dependent on the house of Bates, though he made use of that idea to subjugate the latter; but Nature revenged herself upon him for this lie by permitting him to believe another, which was that these proceedings of his could have some influence in retarding Arthur's marriage.

Though he ought to have known that the obstacles thus set up would, on the contrary, make Arthur doubly eager, and lead him to force on everything, a little mist of complacent delusion was over his eyes in respect to his own adroitness, and he really believed that it might be in his power to save Arthur. And then if he saved Arthur, what might not Lady Curtis be disposed to do? Not, poor Durant, the same thing over again, by bestowing her daughter, of whom she was much more proud than she had ever been of Arthur, upon a poor if rising barrister. No, that was not likely, and he knew it was not likely; but yet he had a certain vague faith in it which impelled him to do anything to please her; and he thought what he had done would please her. He thought he had produced some effect. There was a glow of comfortable sensation in his mind. If, perhaps, he had been not quite kind, not quite just to the poor people he had just quitted, what claim had they upon his kindness? None whatever; and it was all perfectly legitimate, perfectly fair. Were they not coming out of their natural sphere, clutching at the baronet's son for their daughter, publicly boasting the time when Nancy should be my lady? And was not any way of putting an end to this fair and defensible? He had done nothing that it was not quite allowable to do.

In this frame of mind he ate his luncheon, and decided to stay another night at Underhayes. It was rather hard, indeed, to know what to do with himself in the afternoon; but he hoped that perhaps Arthur might change his mind, might think it worth while to come to him and argue the point; and in any arguing of the point, Durant felt that he must be successful. Then he had a bundle of correspondence to get through. A busy man is often entirely thrown out of his mental gear by finding himself shut up in a bare parlor in an inn, without any of his habitual tools, without books or papers. But he had letters to write, which was always an occupation; and one of his letters was to Lady Curtis. Before he could do this, however, it was necessary that he should get paper; and the day was so mild, and the air so sweet, and the appearance of the little place so pleasant, that he went out with an agreeable sense that

his business was not pressing, and that he might linger before coming in.

As Durant went out of the inn, however, he was run against by some one coming in, in hot haste, and with every appearance of impatience and impetuosity.

"I want to speak to a Mr. Durant that is staying here," she said to the waiter; then, stopping short with a start, turned her attention to himself. "I think you are Mr. Durant," she said.

It was Nancy Bates in person. Though he had seen her but vaguely on the previous night, he recognized her now. Her hat looked as if it had been put on hurriedly, and a long lock of brown hair had dropped upon her shoulder. Durant could not but notice how long it was, and how soft and shining it looked—not golden or red, but shining, glossy brown. It caught his eye, even in the midst of the shock he experienced on hearing her ask for him. What did she want with him? He felt himself shrink in spirit, if not in outward appearance. Arthur he had been striving to save—his conscience was clear in that respect; but this young woman, what had his intention been so far as she was concerned? It was not to save her he had been trying, but to break her heart, if she happened to have one, and anyhow, heart or none, destroy her prospects, and steal away her supposed good fortune. Therefore—he could not help it—he shrunk a little from Nancy; and there was a haste and hostile energy in her looks which added to this feeling. He answered, almost in a tone of deprecation,

"Yes, that is my name: and I think it is Miss Bates?"

"Anna Bates," she said, with a little elevation of her head, as if the name she pronounced had been one of imposing importance. "I want to speak to you, please."

Durant was entirely taken aback. He looked at her with an air of helpless bewilderment. What was he to do? Ask her to go back to his sitting-room with him? ask her to go with him outside? He did not know what was etiquette in such regions. No young woman with whom he was acquainted had ever called upon him before, and the young man was utterly puzzled and discomfited, and did not know what to do.

"Surely," he said, hesitating between the stair and the door, with a helpless look at the waiter, who might, he thought, have made some suggestion.

That it was wrong to come to Mr. Durant "on business," and business so urgent, had never crossed Nancy's mind before; but she saw that he thought so, and this discovery, instead of abashing her, fired her with new vehemence. The very wonder in his face was as a flag of aristocratic superiority to Nancy, and made her wild.

"You are surprised," she said, with a look of scorn, "that I should come to you; but I am not one of your fine ladies that send for people to come to them; and there is no room in our house for private talks. You can speak to me in the street, I suppose."

And with this she turned her back upon him and hurried out. Here she paused a moment, seeing, perhaps, for the first time, the difficulties of an indignant demand for explanations upon Underhayes green, in the face of all the people who were coming out on their afternoon walks, and calls, and business. None of these difficulties had ever troubled Nancy before. The inconvenient splendor of being a person whose proceedings were watched had never attended her before. But now it all flashed upon her in a moment. Already it was known in the place that she was going to marry, or rather to be married by, Mr. Curtis; and if she was seen at three o'clock in the afternoon walking about the green in close conversation with another "gentleman," what would everybody say?

Very different had been Sarah Jane's feelings, who only hoped everybody she knew might see her walking with the "gentleman." Already the shadow of her new position had come over Nancy, and the sense that observation now would be degrading rather than flattering. She had not thought about it at all in the fervor of her feelings, when she rushed out impetuously to confront her adversary, but she perceived it through her adversary's eyes. She turned half round to him, and waving her hand towards the other side of the green, where there was a little bit of shade with trees, went on before him, rapidly crossing the grass. Durant followed.

He was nervous about what was going to happen to him: to take him thus under the damp trees, from which a shower of leaves fell at every puff of air, was very much like dragging him to some den where he could be devoured at leisure. Could Arthur be there? But on reflection he felt sure that Arthur, had he known, would have found some means of subduing this impetuosity, and preventing an encounter. It could not be for Arthur's interest in any way.

Before, however, they had got across the green, Durant's fright had subsided; he began to be interested; the situation was piquant, if no more; and that lock of brown hair was very pretty. He would have thought it untidy in Sarah Jane, but here somehow it looked well. He thought of the "sweet neglect" of Herrick's description: the tempestuous petticoat occurred to him in spite of himself, and he began to be half pleased, half excited, by this odd adventure. What would Arthur say if he saw him being thus carried off for a private interview? and the direct course which the impetuous young woman was taking brought them immediately in front of Mr. Eagles's gate. The little line of trees, which looked like a mall in the distance, lay under his garden walls, and it turned out to be of much less importance than he thought—a sweep of some old avenue, a hundred yards or so of path between two fine ranges of elms. It led nowhere, and was quite deserted. A better place for a mysterious interview could scarcely be.

When they had got under the shade of the trees, she turned upon him suddenly.

"You were at our house to-day," she said; "you were saying a great many things about—Mr. Curtis's family. Did they send you, or what right have you to speak for them? I want to know."

"Miss Bates, you are very hasty—very peremptory."

"I am no different from what I have a right to be," she said; and he could hear that her voice trembled with passion, and see that the lines of her face were moving, and that there

were tears which looked more like fire than water in her eyes.

"What do you mean by coming and setting my folks against—Mr. Curtis? You pretend to be a friend of his. What do you do it for? And what right have you to interfere with me?"

"None in the world," said Durant, hastily; "none in the world; nor do I. I told your mother the truth about the Curtises, as I thought I was bound to do."

"Why were you bound to do it? *I* did not ask you to give us any information. You might have consulted me first, or—Mr. Curtis. If we were willing to have nothing said about them, to have nothing to do with them, was that your business? Don't you think it's like a busybody—a meddler, Mr. Durant? I wonder you are not ashamed of yourself!" she said, the passion getting vent, and the tears falling hot and sudden, in spite of herself, out of her eyes. "You, a gentleman! If it had been a silly gossip of a woman, I should not have been surprised."

This, as may be supposed, galled Durant immensely; for what can be harder upon a man than to be called like a gossip and a woman? But he had command of himself.

"I am distressed," he said, "to have caused any annoyance; I had no intention of doing so."

"Then what was your intention?" she said; "I suppose you had one. It will be honester to tell me directly what you mean."

"I have no objection to tell you what I mean," he said, "as I told your mother. The Curtises are my friends. I know them thoroughly, and I know that your marriage will grieve them to the heart. Pardon me if I must speak plainly. It is no offence to you personally, for they don't know you. Arthur has told them the step he is going to take only at the last moment; only, in fact, after they had been told of it from another source. They are deeply offended, as may be easily supposed. He has not behaved to them as he ought."

"You will say nothing against Mr. Curtis, please."

"But I must say something about him. Arthur! Have you any idea, Miss Bates, what Arthur has been to me? My companion since he was *that* height; my younger brother, my charge; nay, almost my child. And you tell me I am not to speak of him! Is it possible, do you think? My affection for Arthur gives me a right to say anything to him—or of him."

"There is no one in the world," she said, with her lips quivering, "who has so much right to him as me."

Durant threw up his shoulders and his hands in the excitement of the moment. "So it appears," he said, "so I suppose—though how it should be so, God knows, is the last of mysteries. Well! let us say he belongs to you, and that not his oldest friend, not his nearest relation, has a right to discuss him if you forbid. It is the wildest madness, but I suppose, as you say, it is true. And what then, Miss Bates? He will have *you*, but he will have nothing besides. Every one else will be separated from him; his parents not only offended, but wounded to the heart; his friends alienated, his position lost. What will he be then, and what will be do? A man cannot be a lover, and nothing else, all his life. He would tire of that, and you would tire of it; but he will have nothing to fall back upon; and, after all, if a man defies his parents and throws off their influence, why should they exert themselves to secure to him the means of defying them? They will not do it—why should they?—and you will find that you have married poverty, helplessness, discontent."

"And if I do," she said, "will that show I am marrying for money? You bad man! You cruel friend! You go and tell everybody that it is because he will be rich—because I shall be my lady—that I am going to marry Arthur. How dare you? how dare you? But if this is how it is going to be, you will all find out different; you will find it is not for his money or for his rank. Go away!" she cried, clenching a hand which was small but strong, and full of impassioned energy; "go away, and don't tell lies of me!"

Durant was impressed in spite of himself. He tried to smile, but could not, and he tried to be angry, but could not refrain from a certain half-respect, half-admiration.

"I tell no lies of you or any one," he said; "I warn you—"

"Warn me! of what? that I shall have a way of showing whether I'm true or not," she said, "whether I'm good or not; and you think that will frighten *me!* Mr. Durant, if his mother sent you, you may go back and tell her what I say. You've dared me to give him up, and I won't give him up; and if I were to give him up a hundred times it would make no difference, for he would not give up me. You can tell her all that. He can do without her, but he can't do without me."

"Do you think that is a kind thing to tell a mother?"

"I don't care," said Nancy; "you have said worse to me; and it's true—and so it's always true. I'd tell my own mother the same. What's a mother? They didn't choose to have us; they didn't pick us out of the world; and, now that we're here, we've got to do the best we can for ourselves. You may go where you like upon your missions, Mr. Durant, but not here—you sha'n't come here! And if you come till doomsday, you won't do any good, for they put more trust in me—and so they ought—than in a cunning lawyer like you. We know what lawyer means," said the excited girl, once more shaking her small clenched fist in his face, "liar—and that's seen in you!"

With this she turned and walked suddenly away, turning the corner of the high garden wall, and disappearing in a whirlwind of excitement and emotion, while he stood thunderstruck, staring after her. Durant stood still and stared, with his mouth open in the extremity of his surprise. He was too much startled even to be angry; but he was discomfited—there was no mistaking that sensation.

As he stood looking after the excited girl, a sense of smallness, almost of baseness, came over him. He had wanted to save Arthur, but he had not taken the other human creature into consideration, who was just as important as Arthur to the world; and he had not realized the kind of being he had to deal with when he had drawn up his own brief, as it were, and instructed himself in the line of argument to be—Lawyer, liar! that was a sharp one—able to smile feebly at it, as

up and went slowly back to his inn; but he could not shake off the sense of failure—the sense of smallness and meanness that had come over him. Not only had he found a foeman worthy of his steel, but she had baffled him and put him to shame even in his own eyes.

CHAPTER VII.

Nor were Durant's troubles over for that day. In the evening another tempest came upon him. He had finished his solitary dinner, and written his letter to Lady Curtis, which was considerably changed from what it was intended to be. He had meant to say that he was in great hopes of having succeeded in his attempt to convince the Bateses that it was not for their interest to allow Arthur to marry their daughter; but after his interview with Nancy he could not say this. On the contrary, he gave a description of her future daughter-in-law, which was very much more favorable to that young woman than any one could have expected.

"She has a great deal of character," he wrote. "She is not vulgar by nature, nor devoid of intelligence. If things come to the worst, something may be made of her."

This was not very satisfactory to Lady Curtis, who would almost rather have heard that her son was about to marry a demon incarnate, who would disgust him sooner or later, and from whom even yet he might be driven. So that poor Durant had doubly lost his work.

He was finishing this letter when his door was opened suddenly, and Arthur Curtis came in unannounced. He was quite pale, with eyes which gleamed red and angry, and an air of furious calm—passion at the white stage to which no utterance would suffice. He came in, closed the door behind him, and then, coming forward, dashed his clenched hand upon the table.

"Look here," he said, "I'll have none of your interference, Durant! Friend you may be, if you like, but dictator to me never—no, I cannot put up with it, and I won't. What has come to you, that you can steal into people's houses and try to deceive a lot of silly women? That is not the sort of thing that used to suit you."

"I have deceived nobody," said Durant, getting red in spite of himself. "It is you who have deceived them."

"Yes, that's it, isn't it?—the argument suits the conduct," said Arthur, with a sneer. "'It is not me, it is you'—the very thing I should have expected to be said; but look here, Durant, if you come between her and me again, if you try to make mischief with her family, if you get me into further trouble, I'll—by Jove, I'll—"

"What will you do?" said Durant, rising, restored to his self-possession, and looking the other steadily in the face.

They stood within a few paces of each other, the one aggressive and furious, the other calm, but excited. They had never had a break before since childhood, and had stood by each other in all kinds of difficulties. This was in Durant's mind, and made the crisis more bitter to him; but Arthur was too much excited to think of it, or of anything else but his grievance. Notwithstanding this, however, the calm look of the familiar face confronting him stilled the young man. He turned away after a moment, and took to angry pacing about the room.

"You!" he cried, "you! If any one had told me that you would not stand by me in a difficulty, would not be my help in any trouble, I should not have believed it. It would have seemed impossible; and that you should take up arms *against* me—against *me*!—*you*, Durant!"

"Arthur," said his friend, with great emotion, "let us speak plainly. You must always be to me, when you are in difficulty, the first person to be thought of. I cannot believe, any more than you can, in circumstances where I should not stand by you. But listen! you are not in difficulty now—you are on the verge, as I think, of a great mistake. Nothing can be more different. As your friend is bound to help you in trouble, so is he bound by every rule to do his best to extricate you now."

"To extricate me!" cried Arthur, with scorn. "From what? From love, happiness, and honor! Are these things from which to extricate a man? And not only so, but to work by underhand means to force me out of the position I have chosen, and which, whatever you may think of it, is heaven to me."

"I have been working by no underhand means."

"What else can you call it? You might have said what you would to me. You were free to say what you liked; but to attack them—behind my back—"

"Arthur," said Durant, "it is useless to evade the matter; this is exactly one of those moments which are often fatal to friendship. You think you are on the eve of happiness. I think you are securing your own misery. Am I to help you to destroy yourself? do you think that is a duty of friendship? or is it not rather my part, by every possible means, to stop you before you go over the precipice?"

"Your very words are an insult," said Arthur; "to me, and to one who is more precious to me than myself."

"Yet I suppose I may have my opinion," said Durant. "You cannot forbid me that. I say nothing against anybody. I only say this will be fatal to you, and it seems to me, if I could hinder it—"

"You can no more hinder it than you can keep the sun from rising to-morrow."

"I am very sorry to hear it, Arthur. I would give a great deal if I could. Think what a change it will make in your life. You will not take your degree now. As for diplomacy, you are shut out from that—it would be impossible. So will Parliament be, and the public life you once thought of. Your own business of a country gentleman you are kept from while your father lives. You have no time for anything else. Where will be your shooting, your fishing, your hunting in the season, your society? You will have to live on your allowance, sparely, economically, without a horse, without a margin. Everything given up for—what?"

"For *her*—for happiness—for everything that makes life worth having."

"For happiness? I don't know much about it, Arthur; it has not come my way. Is it object enough for a man's life? When you live for happiness, are you happy? I ask for infor-

mation. Myself, I get on well enough, but I have never made any great exertion for such an object. Will it answer the purpose? will it repay the cost?"

"You are trying to cheat me out of my just indignation," said Arthur. "Are we on such a footing at this moment as to discuss the position in your cool way? Oh, I confess it is cleverly done! You resume the old tone, you go back to the habit of many a discussion. But at present this will not do. There is something more urgent in hand."

"Why should it not do? You are vexed that I have spoken to the Bates family; but after all, as I have been routed horse and foot by the young lady herself, and ordered off the field of battle—"

"You acknowledge that?" said Arthur, subdued; "ah, I thought you were more sensible than you give yourself credit for being. She is grand when she is excited. Well, Durant, I suppose it is of no use grumbling with you. You know me: when we have quarrelled, I always want to make it up to-morrow. I can't do without you, old fellow; that is not what I came to say; but it is too strong for me. I want you, Durant; you have always stood by me. It does not feel natural that you should be on the other side."

"I am not on the other side," said Durant, with compunction. There were some things in his letter to Lady Curtis which recurred to him, and gave him a choking sensation. His intentions had been friendly, but his acts— Well! as they had been altogether unsuccessful they did not matter much; and he too felt it difficult to resist the familiar face and tone. If he could have done any good—but as this was impossible, why make a painful breach? He held out his hand to his friend. "Look here, Arthur," he said, with a smile, "what is the good of fighting? If I could stop your marriage, I would do it; but apparently I can't. I don't conceal from you that I am very sorry; but if you do this very foolish thing, it seems a pity that you should lose a friend too."

Arthur did not take the hand held out to him; but he sat down somewhat sullenly on the opposite side of the table, and then there ensued a pause, for neither knew what to say.

"I am going back to town to-morrow," said Durant. "I will not undertake to further your prospects; but if you wish any communication made—to take off the edge of the unkindness, Arthur—"

"Unkindness! I have done no unkindness."

"What!—to settle all this without any reference to them, without explanation, without trying to secure their sympathy, their approval—"

"Approval—that was a likely thing! What was the use of making appeals or giving explanations? Here is an example; the moment they do hear, they send you primed and prepossessed against it. I answered their questions; but I knew it was useless, and why should I humiliate myself—and *her*? When it is irrevocable and can't be altered, I always intended to let them know the whole, and throw myself upon their mercy."

"It is clear you expect more magnanimity from them than they have found in you."

r, coolly, "a man must have queer parents if he does not take that for granted. They do put up with things when they can't help themselves. What is the good of worrying them with opposition (which it was clear they must make), and which could only irritate both parties? No, it was not done by inadvertence—it was done advisedly. If you never learned, old fellow, the advantage of doing a thing without permission rather than in the face of a prohibition — it makes all the difference," said Arthur with a sudden hoarse laugh, which ended as suddenly as it began, and had anything but humor in the sound of it. "No, I have no instructions to give you; I will write as soon as —well, after we are married: why should I do anything before?"

"Arthur, for God's sake!" cried his friend, "pause still; think what you are doing."

"That is enough, that is enough! Don't risk our friendship once again, just after it has been renewed; and as you say, if I am going to do anything so very imprudent, at least don't let me lose my friend too," he said, looking at Durant, with eyes which laughed, yet were not far off from tears, and grasping his hand hurriedly. "I'm glad we are not parting forever, old boy, as I almost feared: though I should not wonder if the next morning after we had parted forever, I had knocked you up to tell you what folly it was. A dozen years are not done away with so easily, are they? after all."

They stood grasping each other's hands for a moment, both too much affected for words. Was there a softening, a yielding, in Arthur's breast? Were the ties of the familiar life he knew of old, the faithful and tried affections, family, friends, home, coming back upon him, surging over the hot passion of the new? Durant held him fast for a moment longer than his friend's grasp held, then with a sigh let his hand drop. He would not venture to raise all the question again. It must be left to reason, to his own heart, to — well, at the last, to that guidance of God which, when everything fails, we can trust or mistrust, as the case may be. Evidently there was nothing more for friendship to do or say. And what could with justice have been done or said? Durant asked himself, as he dropped wearily into his seat again after Arthur had gone.

Could any one hope or expect that the guidance of God would lead him to break the most sacred pledge a man could give? If he did so, his family might rejoice, but what could any one, even those most relieved by it, think of Arthur? He might escape ruin, but by what? Falsehood. And which was worst? Could any man dare to go to him and say: Throw off those vows you have repeated so often; cast aside this other creature as dear to heaven as yourself, whom you have persuaded of your love; break her heart, spoil her life, and then return spotless, an honorable man, to your own?

If such an adviser could be, Durant felt that he was incapable of the effort: he felt, even, that with his respect his very love for Arthur would evaporate, were he to know him capable of such treachery and baseness. And yet this was what he had been urging on him! No wonder that the young lover, being a true man, was indignant. Yet, notwithstanding, it was ruin for Arthur; of that there could be as little doubt. This girl, so high-spirited, so pretty, so

young, so attractive in a hundred ways, would be his destruction, separating him from his own original and natural place, cutting short his career, neutralizing all his advantages. Alas for love, the love of the poets!

At what a sacrifice was this young man purchasing that crown of life! At the cost of his home, his future, the very use that was in him as a man. Yet not all these considerations would justify the betrayal of the creature who loved him, or the breaking of his faith. In this dilemma his friend could but keep silent even from thought, with a certain shame of himself and horror of his own efforts, notwithstanding that he had been right in making them, which is one of the most wonderful of human paradoxes. His heart was heavy for Arthur going gayly to his destruction. Yet had he saved himself at this eleventh hour, what could any one have thought of Arthur? Durant could not but feel a sensation of relief that he was not so brave and so wise.

Next morning he left Underhayes, without seeing anything more either of the lovers or the little group which surrounded them; but not without another amusing reminder of the responsibilities he had incurred by interfering. He had no object in going to London by that expeditious morning train which carried off all the business men. He watched them once more, streaming along, neat and cheerful, with cherished rose-buds in their button-holes—rose-buds beyond the reach of the rest of the world; and, when the place was clear and the express gone, started leisurely for a less crowded train.

It did not occur to him to notice a quick, decisive step coming up behind him, as he went to the station. It was not Arthur's springy, rapid step, which might have roused him, but one heavier and more decided. Durant, however, was much startled by finding himself struck lightly but sharply upon the shoulder, as the owner of this footstep came up to him. "Mr. Durant," said Mr. Eagles, "why is not Curtis with you? I told you that I expected you to take away your man. Why do you let him slip through your fingers? I can't have him here."

"I told you, Mr. Eagles, that I had no authority over Curtis."

"No one has any authority; there is no such thing nowadays: call it influence if you like—I don't mind names—but take him away. He is doing no good with me—never did, after the first week. Dilettante fellow, fond of classical reading; that's not the sort of thing I care for, Mr. Durant. When a man comes to me, he comes to work, whether he likes it or not. I am not half sure that I don't prefer them when they dislike it—triumph of principle then. Curtis is worse than doing no good, as I told you—he is doing himself harm. What do you mean to do about this business? Is he to be allowed to make a fool of himself and destroy all his prospects?"

"I must repeat that I have no authority over Arthur Curtis," said Durant; "I am only his friend and school-fellow. You know how little a man will allow his friend to interfere in such a matter."

"On the contrary, I know they are the only people who can interfere. Parents might as well—whistle. I scarcely wonder at that: if one may say so broadly of so large a class, there is not a greater nuisance than parents; and in this sort of business they're hopeless. But a man like himself, knowing all the consequences—why, no one could speak with so much authority."

"What would you advise me to say to him?" said Durant, with a kind of half hope that this sharp and energetic intelligence might strike out some new suggestion, tempered by an inclination to laugh and flout at any solution he might offer of the difficulty. "For myself, I am at my wits' end."

"Say to him!" said the little pedagogue, with a snort and a puff of fiery resolution. "I'd take him away; I should not waste words. I'd have him out of the place before the day was over. There's nothing like isolation, in any bad disease."

"There are difficulties," said Durant: "to make him go, in the first place, is not easy; and there is, perhaps, a claim of honor. I don't know how to advise him to cancel his word."

"Honor! word!" said Mr. Eagles, in successive snorts; "I can see how well qualified you are for the business. Fiddlesticks! a little money afterward would salve all that. Is he to ruin himself for the sake of his word—to Bates the tax-collector's daughter!" The force of ridicule seemed incapable of going further. "I will not resort to your advice, Mr. Durant—no offence—when any of my men are in trouble."

"Thanks! I hope you will not," said Durant, nettled; and so rushed to his train in considerable indignation and excitement. His word to Bates's daughter! Was not that as good as his word to a duchess? the young man asked himself. He was near becoming Arthur's advocate, instead of his adversary. And if Lady Curtis assailed him as Mr. Eagles had done, what should he say to her? Must he lose all hopes of pleasing the family in consequence of this moral dilemma? Durant had no hope that any pleasure he could do to the family would ever really influence them towards the granting of his own private wishes, which had never been breathed in any ear. He knew, in short, as well as a man can know by conviction of the understanding, that these wishes were absolutely hopeless, and that nothing he could do to propitiate the family would really tell upon them. But nevertheless he clung to the hope of proving himself useful, of doing something which would conciliate and dispose them towards him.

Foolish young man! And what if Nancy Bates with her impetuous indignation, her self-confidence, her strong satisfaction in Arthur's poverty, which would prove her disinterestedness, should spoil it all?

CHAPTER VIII.

"He has gone; he will never trouble you any more; and I hope you will forgive him, dear, for my sake. Poor old Durant! he has always looked after me, and bullied me. When I was at Eton first, I was his fag. I don't think he can forget that."

"I dare say not," said Nancy; "he thinks he should always have the upper hand. He thinks

you should never have any friends but of his choosing. And then he will go and tell stories about us all to your father and mother."

"I don't think, perhaps, you do him quite justice," said Arthur, musing, with a flush on his face. "Old Durant is not like that. The worst he has to say he will say to yourself, not behind your back; and he will not gossip about you."

"He is free to gossip as much as ever he likes, so far as I am concerned; but I don't like those sort of people; and give into them I would not —not for the world!"

"Mr. Durant is gone, is he?" said Sarah Jane, in a voice of dismay. "You are so selfish, you two! What harm was he doing? I am sure he was very nice. What did you send him away for? It is so like you, Nancy, blazing up into one of your fits, and never thinking of spoiling other people's fun—what you always do!"

"Halloo!" said Arthur, half amused, half angry, "what has Durant to do with other people's fun? He is not at all a funny person, so far as I can see."

"Oh! he may not show it to you, but Mr. Durant is very good company," said Sarah Jane, with a toss of her head. "He is not so dreadfully ancient that you should call him Old Durant; and I am sure if he likes to come back here, I shall be very glad, for one. And I think he will too," said the girl, elevating her foolish but not unpretty nose. It was of the tip-tilted order, and could express a great deal of half-saucy piquant self-confidence. Arthur stared at her blankly with a painful sort of offence coming over him. It made him quite unreasonably angry that this foolish girl should suppose that Durant—*Durant*, of all people in the world!—was interested in her pink prettiness: the idea quite shocked him. He whispered to Nancy, in the corner, a little admonition.

"You should not let that girl talk so," he said. "To hear her chatter of Durant! It is like a magpie and an eagle. You, who have so much more sense, you should not let her do so. It makes one angry in spite of one's self."

This was a whisper in the confidence of their closeness and oneness; but Nancy replied aloud, "Why shouldn't she chatter about Durant, if she pleases? He is no better than she is. Magpie, indeed! you are very uncivil, Arthur. I think my sister is quite as good as your friend—even if it was a nicer friend than Durant."

"Did he say I was a magpie?" said Sarah Jane. "Oh, Nancy! and me always standing up for him! I did, to Durant himself. I said we are all very fond of Arthur, we'll none of us believe any harm of Arthur. Oh! and to call me a magpie! I could not have believed it of him," and the girl shed a shower of facile tears.

"You see this is how it acts," said Nancy. "Durant comes here and tries to make mischief, and you tell me no, he has done nothing wrong; it is only his mistaken ideas; he will say nothing to other people half so bad as he says to ourselves. That is all very well, Arthur; but when I see to the contrary—you yourself insulting my family for the sake of Durant—"

"My darling," said Arthur, humbly, "don't, I beseech you—don't, if you care for me—say Durant!"

"What should I say?" cried Nancy, more and more roused. "Mr. Durant, my Lord Durant, perhaps? Oh, let's be respectful, Sarah Jane! We didn't know that it was royalty that was coming. Arthur is humble enough himself, but the moment we set up to be as good as his friend, then it shows. And I should like to know why we are to be on our knees to *Mister* Durant? Why shouldn't Sally have her fun out of him, if she likes? Oh, let me alone, mother! Don't go on winking and nodding at me! Arthur may take offence if he pleases, he may take himself off altogether if he pleases—what do I care? Do you think I am going to lie down for his family to tread over and spit upon, and all his friends? Not I! If he expects that, he has reckoned without Nancy—and that he'll soon see!"

"Oh, Arthur, don't mind her," cried Mrs. Bates; "she's just in one of her tantrums. Most times Nancy is as gentle as a lamb, but when she's roused, she's roused; and you'll allow it's aggravating. Not but Mr. Durant was very civil-spoken; I haven't a word to say against him. Indeed, I rather liked him, what I saw of him. You're both too touchy, that's what it is; Nancy can't bear her sister to be set down as if she was nobody, and Arthur don't like any joking about his friend. But there, there now, kiss and be friends, children! If you quarrel you only make each other miserable, and get miserable yourself. The night before last and last night were both spoiled with it. Don't you go on, now he's gone."

"I have no wish to go on," said Arthur, rather gloomily. He had risen from the side of his betrothed, and was walking up and down, biting his nails, which was a way he had. Certainly there was no reason in the world why he should be so sensitive about Durant. Durant's social pretensions were much beneath his own, and he had found his fate in this humble place; why should every vein tingle with the idea that Durant, who was only the Bond Street saddler's grandson, after all, should flirt with Sarah Jane? But nature is unreasonable. Right or wrong, the suggestion filled him with ridiculous annoyance and disgust.

"Well, mother," said Nancy, "if my sister is not to be allowed to joke about his friend, why should he pretend to be in love with me? Sarah Jane is as good as I am. She's just the same as I am. She's younger, and most folks think she's prettier. If Durant is too good for her, it stands to reason that *he* is too good for me."

"For Heaven's sake let there be an end of this!" cried Arthur. "You don't know the effect your words have upon me. They make me ill, they make me wretched. I say nothing against Sarah Jane. I never have been the least negligent, the least disrespectful, of your sister."

"No, indeed," said Sarah Jane, who was good-nature itself, "Arthur has never got on the high horse to me. He's always been kind. It's nothing worth talking about. A deal of folks are touchy about their friends—more touchy than about themselves."

"But," said Arthur, sitting down on the sofa again, and relapsing into his lover's whisper, "they are not you; you are yourself, my own Nancy, my flower among weeds. There is nobody like you; don't you know that I think so?

Then don't expect me to put them, or any one, on the same level with you."

Nancy held back and grumbled still, shutting her ear against these sweet words. But Sarah Jane had retired from the field, and her mother made secret signs to her, deprecating her folly. Why should she "go on" like that, and worry Arthur?

Thus, after a while, the commotion subsided. Durant was gone safely out of the place, and it was within about ten days only of the wedding. This must certainly be the last of the storms, though it was by no means the first. The house was too small to overflow with millinery, as most houses do at such a moment, and the Bateses were not rich enough to fit out the bride extensively; but yet they were doing what they could for her. Though she had only white muslin for her wedding-dress, her mother had gone up to Shoolbred's to buy Nancy a "silk" for best, which, except her aunt's old ones, was the first "silk" she had ever had; and everything was progressing.

Arthur, if he could have managed it, would have had a kind of runaway wedding, but the Bateses were respectable, and would not hear of such a thing. All was to be done decently and in order, however he might feel. It was the first wedding in the family, and they meant to do justice to it. But when Arthur went back to his room in Mr. Eagles's commodious house that evening, his heart was heavier than it became the heart of a bridegroom to be. Up to this time he had been able to turn off with a laugh the incongruities of his position; even they seemed to give piquancy to his happiness, and to the perfections of the beautiful bride whom he had found in so humble a place. Who could think of the place when they saw her? And Nancy in reality was full of variety and charm, and the courtship had been amusing as well as entrancing, devoid of all that monotony which is the usual curse of successful love. But Durant's visit had given a great shock to the young man, and, oddly enough, the whole force of that shock only came upon him when Sarah Jane made her little speech implying an interest on her part in Durant. Sarah Jane! The idea was so preposterous, so unnatural, that he laughed in spite of himself, and then grew hot, and red, and angry.

This attempt to repeat his own love history, with Durant for the hero and Sarah Jane for the heroine, seemed to throw ridicule and debasement upon the little romance of which, up to this moment, he had been almost proud. It seemed to place Sarah Jane on the same level with her sister, a suggestion which fired him to fury; for there was just so much truth in it as made the suggestion intolerable. To the eyes of the world, perhaps, even to his mother and sister, there might seem no difference between Nancy and Sarah Jane; and he himself might seem to others to make as ridiculous a figure as he would feel Durant to make had he fallen a victim to the other girl's attractions.

The feeling that this was so, though he would not allow it in words, haunted him, as it were, underground, in the bottom of his heart, and made him more angry than anything had yet done. He would not allow it to be put into words even within his mind, but it had flashed across him, and could not now be annihilated; he himself must appear to others as contemptible, as idiotical as he would have felt Durant to be had he wanted to marry Sarah Jane. And this idea brought all his native world before him; his mother and sister, who, no doubt, by this time had heard Durant's account, and were talking it over, as women do, going over and over it, and coming back to it again and again. He could see them in the large rooms of the house in town, where they had come hastily from the country on hearing all this, and where he had been summoned to meet them, though he had refused to go.

How different those rooms were from Mrs. Bates's parlor! It would have been strange indeed if the contrast had not struck him. He saw, in imagination, the two anxious faces close to each other in the wider horizon of their life and surroundings, the spacious quiet, the order and refinement which he had grown almost out of acquaintance with. What story would Durant tell, what account would he give? Would he place Nancy on a level with the others of her family, or was he sufficiently clever to perceive the vast difference between them? Arthur could not tell.

If Durant had, indeed, walked and talked voluntarily with Sarah Jane, was it possible that he could perceive the infinite superiority of Nancy? His lip curled with the true stage sneer. He was ready to have laughed the "Ha, ha!" the bitter laugh of conventional ridicule and despair. It was long now since he had paid any attention to the reading which was his supposed object, and he rushed hastily up-stairs to his room when he entered the house of Mr. Eagles. It was a large, handsome, old-fashioned house. He went upstairs, glad that all the doors were closed, and that there was nobody to meet him on the stairs to ask him unpleasant questions.

Mr. Eagles had said something to him on the day before which had offended Arthur, but which he had been half inclined to laugh at; but he did not laugh now. Out of his own half-amusement with the circumstances of his wooing, he had come suddenly, through Durant, to have an angry and wounded consciousness of how it would appear to the world. Even the Eagleses, what must they think? Arthur resolved hastily not to continue here, to separate himself at least from criticism. Certainly Durant, thus far, had done him nothing but harm. He had opened his eyes, as the eyes of Adam were opened in the garden, and a hot, resentful shame, not of his Nancy or his projected marriage, but of the wrong and ridiculous ideas people might entertain about them, had risen up in his mind.

Nothing could have been a worse preparation for the visit which Mr. Eagles himself was coming up-stairs to make him. Mr. Eagles felt that he had already delayed much too long, and put himself in the wrong by his non-interference; but Durant's visit had broken the ice for him, and he had made up his mind to delay no longer. Arthur had scarcely lighted his candles and thrown himself into his easy-chair by the fire, when the master of the house knocked at his door.

"Mr. Eagles!" he cried, with angry consternation, as he saw him.

Of course, he knew what was coming. He

cast a quick, instinctive glance at a portmanteau which was in a corner. He would pack it up at once and be gone.

"I have seen nothing of you, Curtis, for some weeks," said Mr. Eagles, abruptly. "I have been remiss in seeing you on the subject. Men come here, you are aware, to read, not for other pursuits; but you have not been reading."

"No; you have reason to find fault," said Arthur, with candor. "I acknowledge it. And the fact is, I am on the eve of going away. I, too, ought to have seen you about it before, but I have been occupied."

"Evidently—and how occupied?" said the little man, sternly. "I have nothing to do with your morals, Mr. Curtis. I didn't undertake to look after your conduct."

"Conduct—morals!" cried the young man.

"Yes, sir!" said the "coach," in a voice of thunder, "conduct and morals? Do you think it shows either morals or conduct to shirk entirely the object for which you were received under my roof, and to give all your attention to a love affair—an intrigue?"

"How dare you use such a word?" cried Arthur; but the effect of his indignation was spoiled by the fact that his opponent was too voluble and energetic to give him his turn in speaking, or anything more than just a momentary opportunity to insert, edgeways, half a word.

"This is not what you came here for," said Mr. Eagles. "Your father has a right to turn upon me, and ask me what I mean by it; and all the fathers of all the men have a right to drag me over the coals for countenancing such misconduct. Parents are intolerable, but here they might have some reason. I have done wrong in letting you remain under my roof."

"That is easily managed," cried Arthur, with a rush, seizing upon the portmanteau. "You shall very soon be relieved of my presence."

"I mean to be," said Mr. Eagles. "You ought to have gone long since. You ought never to have been here at all. Oh," he said, with provoking composure, as Arthur began in fury to empty his drawers bodily into the portmanteau, "it is not necessary to clear out to-night. Nothing can happen before to-morrow. I don't want to be unreasonable. You can stay for to-night."

"Not another hour!" cried Arthur in his excitement, and he violently pulled out one drawer after another.

Mr. Eagles stood for a moment and watched him with a saturnine smile. At last he resumed:

"You had better go in comfort when you go; there is no such hurry all at once. To-morrow will do. Does your father, may I ask, know how your time has been occupied here?"

"Perhaps you have told him," said Arthur, looking up from his hurried packing.

"No, sir; I have not told him. I have nothing to do with it. I expressly said that I was not responsible for conduct; but he ought to have been informed all the same. I hope somebody has done it. If it were my business, if I had ever gone in for that sort of thing, I should have done it. I take no credit for being silent. It was no business of mine that you were making a fool of yourself. But, on second thoughts, I think I have made a mistake. It was my business, more or less. The men ought not to have been subjected to such an example."

"Mr. Eagles," cried Arthur, furious, "do you mean me to toss you out of window, or throw you down-stairs?"

"You are welcome to try," said the little man, standing firm as a rock, with his legs wide apart; "perfectly welcome to try. I am out of training, it is true, but I am not afraid of you, and I mean that you should hear the truth for once before you leave my house. Your conduct, sir, has been that of a fool—not a wicked fool, I am glad to say. If you had been deceiving that girl, it is I who would have kicked you down-stairs, training or not; but though you're honorable, you're a fool, sir. You're sacrificing your life; for what?—for a delusion. No man of your position ever got on comfortably with a girl of hers, uneducated, uncultivated—"

"Have you nearly done?" asked Arthur, white with rage, and scarcely able to restrain himself.

"I have done altogether," said Mr. Eagles. "You have my opinion, and that is all that is necessary. The house is shut up for the night. Don't show yourself twice a fool by rushing out at this hour. Go to bed and quiet your heated brains, and go to-morrow. You are a fool, as I say, but you are not dishonorable; and I hope your idiocy may turn out better than it deserves to do. Good-night."

CHAPTER IX.

On the evening of the same day, Durant told his tale to Lady Curtis. She and her daughter had come to London on hearing the news of Arthur's "entanglement," as many an alarmed mother and sister have done before them. Sir John either could not or would not join them. He had less faith than women have in the efficacy of personal remonstrances, and indeed he had no great faith in the delinquency, to start with, and gave his son credit for "more sense," if less virtue, than they believed him capable of.

To hear that Arthur was on the eve of marriage had stunned Sir John. He had written with indignant vehemence, and he had commissioned his "man of business" to go and see the "young fool;" and he had forbidden his wife to go to her son, as she desired. "Get him to come to you, if you can," he had said; but he was afraid for the results of a visit from his wife, with the possibility of an introduction of the girl, and a melting of my lady's heart over her son's love. Sir John gave his wife credit for much more sentiment than she possessed; and as for Lucy, she of course was sentimental enough to be sympathetic at once without any preliminaries. "You had better leave him to the lawyers," Sir John said, having a strong confidence in people who could make themselves disagreeable; but he consented that the ladies should go to town to be near the spot, if the other functionaries managed to "unearth" the culprit.

Once away from that temptation, once delivered from the siren who had "entangled" him, no doubt Arthur would be safer with his mother and sister than anywhere else. And Lady Curtis had acquiesced, though with reluctance, in this prohibition. She had felt that to go and see him

might bring her into painful collision with the other people about him, and, at the best, would expose Arthur to what a young man likes least —the shame of being interfered with, and worried by his family in full sight of the world.

Sir John, however, had nothing to do with the mission of Durant; *he* was the emissary of the ladies, called by them to their aid in the emergency. No other messenger had seemed to them so suitable. His dearest friend, his *ami de l'enfance*, what more natural than that they should have recourse to his aid? And in these circumstances it may be supposed how hard it was for Durant to tell the story of his own defeat. He did it in the library in Berkeley Square, in the waning afternoon, just before the evening fell. The room itself, which seemed to him half as big as the whole town of Underhayes, was full of ghostly books, showing here and there in a streak of gilding, in a bit of white vellum, which caught the remains of the red October sunshine. The thinned trees waved slowly across the windows, and when a gust of wind came, a shower of falling leaves swept over the firmament outside.

Lady Curtis sat between the fire and the nearest window, listening intently with her eyes fixed on his face. Lucy was in one of the window-seats, almost behind their visitor. She could not watch his face openly as her mother did, but she was not less anxious than her mother. When he turned round to her, as he did often, she shrunk a little farther back, preferring to watch him unobserved; for to Lucy, as to many other women, it seemed that half the story was told by the countenance of the teller.

Lady Curtis had been a beautiful woman in her day, and had the beauty of her age now, as perfect an example of forty-five as could be desired. She was ample in form, but her head and face had retained all their delicacy and refinement; and if there was a slight hollow in the cheek, and a slight fulness about the throat, neither was sufficient to tell against her; and, modified by youth, and by a somewhat softer disposition, Lucy's face was as her mother's. They were neither of them brilliant in color. Lady Curtis had acquired something in this way with the matronly increase of her figure; but Lucy had no more than the rose-tint which health gives, and her hair was soft light-brown, a shade or two lighter than her eyes—hair which in her mother's case was so daintily sprinkled with gray as to appear only lighter in tint than it had once been.

Whoever desired to see Lady Curtis as she was at twenty had but to look at her daughter, and whoever wanted to make sure what Lucy would look like a quarter of a century hence could see it in Lady Curtis's face. It gives an additional charm to both when this resemblance is carried out as it was in these two.

It makes both youth and age more fair, bringing them together in a tender half-mist of illusion, one face in two representations. The mother and the child both profited by it; Lady Curtis showing at her best in her darling's brown eyes, and disclosing in her own how little there was to alarm the warmest admirer in that darling's future. And they were proud of their resemblance, a little for the beauty's sake, perhaps, but a great deal more for the love's. Durant felt all around him a subtle air of witchery between the mother and the daughter. The very atmosphere was Lucy—sweet, soft, yet penetrating. And the two ladies seemed to look at each other through him as if he had been made of glass, and knew his inmost heart.

At present they were much cast down by what he said. He had described to them the Bates household, the little stuffy parlor, the rum-and-water, and Sarah Jane; and, worst of all, Arthur's determined adherence to his love and his promise. It seemed incredible to them that their son and brother should be satisfied in such a place. Some occult influence, something uncanny, seemed to be in the "infatuation" altogether. "And, Mr. Durant, do you really think nothing, *nothing* will make him give it up?"

"Indeed I do think so," said Durant; "I cannot say otherwise, and I am sure you would not wish to hear anything less than the truth. He is—very much attached—to her."

"And she—is just like the others," said Lady Curtis, faintly, "a little better you said, not so vulgar? Heaven help us! that I should speak so of my son's—no, Mr. Durant, not yet—I *cannot* call her my son's bride. Something may come in the way, something must be thought of—"

"I don't think you will find anything. I have used every argument; and, to tell the truth, I do not know that I am quite sure in my own mind —of course I did not say this to Arthur—I am not quite convinced in my own thoughts—"

"Of what, Mr. Durant?" Lady Curtis said this anxiously in front of him, and Lucy breathed it half under her breath behind. He looked at the mother, but turned his chair a little, so as to come nearer the daughter, who eluded him gliding still a little farther back.

"Well," he said, "you may not be pleased, but I must speak according to my conscience. I would give a year of my life to get Arthur free, you know that—"

"What are you going to tell us?" cried Lady Curtis, clasping her white hands. Lucy did not say anything, but leaned forward, so intent that when he again turned to her she did not, as usual, withdraw.

"It is just this," he said, sinking his voice; and the evening air seemed to make a visible droop towards the darkening to increase the alarming effect: "that I dare not, on my honor, say any more to Arthur on the subject. He is a gentleman; I cannot, even to save him from misery, bid him break his word."

"Good God!" cried Lady Curtis, starting to her feet, and her excitement was so strong that the exclamation may be forgiven her. "His word—when his whole career and happiness are at stake—to a creature like that!"

"I knew that was what you were going to say," came to him, in a sigh, from the dim light in the window, against which, herself a shadow, Lucy was. And this, though there was no word of encouragement in it, gave Durant strength.

"I understand your feeling," he said, addressing her mother; "I thought the same when I went there; but, Lady Curtis—"

"Don't speak to me! don't speak to me!" she cried, "they have entrapped you too; you have encouraged him in his folly. His word!"

She walked up and down the room in a fit of

impatience, her hands clasped, and inarticulate moans came from her unawares. The fire-light seemed to get stronger and warmer as the daylight waned, and it was against this glow that they saw her figure in her excitement. They—for Lucy kept still in the window, putting up her hand furtively to dry her eyes, not joining herself to her mother. She had put herself silently, he felt it, on his side. In another minute Lady Curtis sat down again, dropping impatiently into her chair. "Well!" she said, almost harshly, "how about his word?"

"Do not be angry with me," said Durant, quite humbly. He could afford to be humble with Lucy backing him up. "I have not betrayed to him this feeling, which, if it is fantastic, I cannot help it." Here Lucy made a slight movement which seemed to him to imply a "no, no." "I have acted against it. It was not in my mind at first. But if you will consider the circumstances—there is nothing which can be called entrapping. Nothing has been done to deceive him—all the reverse; and he has engaged himself to this girl voluntarily; made every kind of promise to her. Can I bid him withdraw now, perjure himself, deceive her?"

"Tut! tut!" said Lady Curtis. "Don't deceive yourself with big words; all this solemnity is unnecessary. They are not accustomed to it in that class of society: a little arrangement with the family, an offer of so much— Do you really think more would be wanted? Mr. Durant, you are too romantic. How I wish I had gone myself!"

"You would have done no good had you gone yourself. Even if you could have persuaded the family, there is Arthur to deal with—and her—He loves her, Lady Curtis; there is no sham on Arthur's part."

"Fiddlesticks!" she cried, rising again in restless excitement. "Arthur, a boy, a light-hearted creature that would mend of any heart-break in a week; and she—of course I don't know her—but there is nothing so good for wounded feelings, or so healing, as bank-notes."

"Mamma!" said Lucy, holding out her hands with a mute entreaty; and then she added, "If you offered them money, what would Arthur say?"

"Oh, what would Arthur say? and what would Arthur do? and is he not bound to keep his word?" cried Lady Curtis. "How you worry me with your sentimentalizing! What should have been done, was to bring him away—to hush it up. And it might have been done, but Mr. Durant has spoiled it all; he might have done it. Nobody has so much power with Arthur. If he had only brought him away for a single day, all might have been well."

"He would not have come," said Durant, more to himself than to her, for he was vexed and angry, though he was most anxious not to show it. "I—power with him! He quarrelled with me outright, would not speak to me. I tried what I could. The family might have yielded, but she would not yield—not an inch. She told me, when I threatened that Sir John and you would withdraw or diminish his allowance, and that he might become poor, that there was all the more reason why she should hold by him—it would prove her sincerity."

"I should have said the same thing," said Lucy, holding her breath.

"You! you have been brought up very differently. So she was disinterested, was she? Ah," said Lady Curtis, calming a little, "that is more dangerous than I thought."

"Yes," said Durant, pleased to have produced some effect, and carried beyond the bounds of prudence, "that is exactly what she said. It was her only chance to show that it was of himself she was thinking, not any wish to be rich or to become my lady."

"To become my lady!" My lady faltered as if a blow had been struck at her. Yes, to be sure, her son would be Sir Arthur in his turn, and his wife Lady Curtis, everybody knew that; but to feel that your end is anticipated, and your very name appropriated, this gives even to the old, much more to the middle-aged, a curious thrill of sensation. It was a shock to her. She felt as if she had been struck; then she recovered herself, and laughed a little, short, hard laugh. "So," she said, rubbing her hands feebly together, "she is looking forward to that. I did not think of that."

Durant saw his mistake, but he did not see how to mend it. Lucy, darting upon him in the darkness what he felt to be a glance of reproach, rushed hastily past him to her mother. But by this time Lady Curtis had recovered herself.

"Never mind," she said, "never mind, my dear. It was quite natural. But that was not Arthur. No, we know him better than to believe that."

"And she does not know you—did not know what she was saying."

"Oh, as for that! Ring the bell, Lucy. Let us have the lamp, at least, if we can have no other light on the subject. It was just the thing, of course, that an ignorant, underbred girl would think of."

"But, mamma! Yes, it was her ignorance; and she said—that was what you were telling us, Mr. Durant?—that she would be glad to think there was no chance of this now?"

"Lucy," said her mother, taking no notice of Durant, "the one thing that could vex me most in this would be that you, out of perverse, youthful generosity, should take up the part of champion to this girl. Yes, you are beginning—I have noticed it. But I cannot bear this; it is the only thing wanting to fill up my cup."

"I will not, mother dear. I will do nothing to vex you. You shall not have to struggle with me too. Has there ever been a time when we have not been in sympathy? But still we must be just," said Lucy, with her arm round her mother's waist. She said the last words almost in a whisper. They stood clinging together, relieved against the warm light from the fire. All the rest of the room had fallen into darkness, the windows but so many stripes of a pale glimmer, no real light coming from them, all gloom about, only this glow of warmth showing the two who held together. Durant had nothing to do with that warmth and union. He sat behind in the dark, neither taking any notice of him. And in his heart there was a certain bitterness. He had left his own concerns, at their appeal. He had taken a great deal of trouble, and this was all the acknowledgment. He felt very sore and wounded in his heart.

Then lights were brought into the room, lamps

which made two partial circles of illumination; and the presence of the servant who brought them necessitated a few words on ordinary subjects. Lady Curtis resumed her seat with that anxious hypocrisy by which we show our respect for the curious world below stairs, and asked Mr. Durant if he meant to remain in town, or if he was going back to the country. And he told her, not without meaning, that having come to town, though a little earlier than he intended, he meant to stay. There was a pause when they were alone again, and then Durant rose to go away.

"I am afraid I have not succeeded in doing what you expected of me," he said, somewhat drearily. "I did the best I could, and if you like I will go again, though I shall get but a poor reception. I am unfortunate," he added, with a faint smile, which had its meaning too.

"Mamma," said Lucy, "you are not going to let Mr. Durant go, thinking we are ungrateful to him! That can never be—when he has taken so much trouble."

"Trouble when one has failed does not count for much," he said, smiling. "It is unkind to talk to me of being grateful or ungrateful. Am I not as much, I mean almost as much, very nearly as much, interested in Arthur as yourselves—as if he were my brother?" he said, with vehemence. "He has been so; I can never think of him otherwise, whatever happens."

"And whatever happens, you will always think of him so?" cried Lucy, for the moment forgetting her reserve. "Oh, promise me, Mr. Durant! Even if this makes a difference to us, it will make none to you? If he is so wrong, if he is so foolish that we have to turn from him, you will not? It will make no change to you?"

"None!" he said, fervently. "None! I will stand by him, whatever happens. You may trust me—especially now."

Lucy knew that he meant, especially since she had asked him, and got a sudden soft suffusion of color which tinted her to her very hair; but Lady Curtis thought he meant—and how justly!—especially now when there was need of every friendship to stand by her son. She answered him with a struggle between the gratitude which she ought to feel and the annoyed disappointment and distress that filled her heart.

"We have no right to ask such a pledge from you, Mr. Durant. Yes, you have always been very kind, very kind. Forgive me," she said, softening, "if I am too unhappy to say what I ought. I thought something might have been done. But to think that we must stand by calmly and see him accomplish his own destruction! Oh, think again!" she cried, with sudden tears, "can we do nothing, nothing more, to save my boy from this miserable fate?"

Durant put down his hat. He did not go till late, nearly midnight. They sat and talked of Arthur, nothing but Arthur, the whole evening through.

CHAPTER X.

THAT which Lady Curtis had reproached Durant for not doing was done by the lawyers so successfully that Arthur Curtis was driven almost frantic, and swore wild oaths of vengeance upon his family. Sir John's ambassador was not held back by any delicacy. He offered a sum which made Mrs. Bates tremble, and moved her husband to declare, with emphasis, that they had never thought of going against Sir John—that, of course, they wouldn't go against Sir John. Mr. Bates had a reverence for the upper classes which was almost sublime. He made no radical revolutionary demand of excellence from them; he did not even require that they should benefit, or be especially civil to, himself. Anyhow, and under any circumstances, he was willing to give himself up to be trodden under the feet of any Sir John, if need was; and that he should oppose one, after his will was fully known, seemed impossible. Especially a Sir John with a bag of money in his hand.

"Let him marry our Nancy, after Sir John Curtis, his excellent father, has spoke against it! You couldn't do such a thing, Sarah," he said; "and when there is a nice bit of money coming in for doing what is only our dooty—"

"Our duty is first to Nancy," said Mrs. Bates, doubtfully; "and if we were to say it shouldn't be, who can tell if she'd obey us? Nancy has a spirit of her own."

That this was true they both had good occasion to know. But it was a great temptation. The lawyer gave them to understand that if Nancy could be withdrawn from the field, and Arthur allowed to go free—this was how they all put it, making believe that Arthur was a kind of caged bird, to be let loose or kept in a cage at will—a thousand pounds might be forth-coming. A thousand pounds! never before in all their lives had such a sum been dangled before the eyes of this pair. There seemed so many things that they could do with it. It would portion off, they thought, all the children. With two hundred a piece, Matilda and Sarah Jane would be heiresses, and Charley might have a little more to start him in business; and a sum left in the bank for a rainy day.

What a heavenly prospect it was! "Was there any sweetheart in the world," the tax-collector asked, "that was worth it?" and Mrs. Bates shook her head emphatically and said, "No—certainly not!" But, then, would Nancy see that? Girls had their own ways of thinking; and on the other side was her sweetheart, and the marriage that was all settled, that everybody knew of. Mrs. Bates felt that even to herself this would be a bitter pill—to countermand all the preparations for the wedding, and give all the neighbors a right to say that the Bateses had overreached themselves, and pride was having a fall.

This, no doubt, would be a tremendous price to pay; but a thousand pounds! They talked it over until it seemed to them both that not to have this thousand pounds would be at once a deception and a wrong. The Lord knew it was not for themselves they wanted it. But Mr. Bates was more and more strongly of opinion that to prefer a sweetheart to this sum of money, that would be the making of the family, was something beyond mortal perversity. He was for sending her away at once to a brother of his who lived in Wapping, without leaving her time to communicate with Arthur.

"But you must lock her up when she gets to Wapping," said Mrs. Bates,

she'd write to him straight off to let him know where she was—and where would be the gain?"

"Well, Sally, we'd have had nothing to do with it, you know," said Mr. Bates, not liking to put the suggestion into words, but yet feeling that if the thousand pounds were paid, and circumstances happened after, over which they had no control—why, they could have no control over circumstances—and nobody would ask them to give back the money. Mr. Bates's wits had been sharpened by his tax-collecting, but his wife was not so clever.

"If we take the money, we'll have to do the work," she said; "and it's all very well to talk, but who'll manage Nancy? That girl do scare me."

"Fudge! you can manage her if you like. What girl can stand out again her mother?" said Bates.

"It is a deal you know!" said his wife, with mingled grandeur and scorn; "but I'll sound Nancy. I think sometimes that she's a bit tired of him. He's a gentleman, and has nice ways; but he's not so desperate in earnest, like as John Raisins is after Sarah Jane."

"Ah! that's the kind of husband to get for your girls. A steady young fellow doing a good business, with a nice shop and a nice house. That's the man for my money," said Mr. Bates.

"That shows again just what a deal you know," said she. "Sarah Jane would rather have had Mr. Durant, that lawyer fellow, if he had offered, than half a dozen of Johnny Raisins. That's how it is with girls. A gentleman! that's all their cry. And I won't say but I like 'em best myself," Mrs. Bates said, after a pause. "They have a different way with them; but these are things that women take more notice of than men."

"Stuff and nonsense!" said the tax-collector, piqued by the suggestion.

"You know, William," said Mrs. Bates, solemnly, "that if it hadn't been for your genteel ways, and what you may call a genteel business, not like a shop, or that sort of thing, that I'd never have married you."

"Oh, I like that!" he said. But he was, on the whole, pleased to think his occupation still struck his wife as a genteel business. "I've got to give an answer to the gentleman to-morrow, Sally. There's not much time to lose."

"I'll sound Nancy," said Mrs. Bates, but she shook her head.

"Sound her! I'd pack her off to Sam," said the father; but that only showed how little he knew.

And Nancy, as Mrs. Bates divined, on being sounded, was furious. She had no words to express her indignation. She rushed out in hot haste to find Arthur, and denounce his family to him. He had left Mr. Eagles, and was living in lodgings on the green, and there Nancy flew in hot haste, tapping at his window, which was on the ground-floor, and calling him forth. She would have gone in, but it had been evident to her that this was not the kind of thing that pleased Arthur. She burst forth into a furious assault upon his family the moment he joined her.

"... not just giving in to them, I'd nev-..." she said. "That is what you call gentlefolks—to come undermining, offering money, insulting folks that are a deal better than themselves!"

"Trying to ruin my happiness," said Arthur, with flashing eyes; "that is not the thing you seem to think of."

"How can I, when it's me that's insulted?" cried the girl. "Oh! I'd like to give them a bit of my mind! I'd just like to tell my lady what a girl like me thinks of her? I'd like to tell her that, just to spite her! Just to show how I despise her, I'd marry you if you hadn't a penny!"

"Nancy, my mother has nothing to do with this," said Arthur, to whom, as was natural enough, this form of moral obligation was not the most delightful. "I don't mean to say that you have not a perfect right to be indignant; but it is not my mother that is to blame."

"Oh yes, so you think," cried the girl; "but it's always women that do the worst things. I'm not afraid of men. They may stab you bold to your face, but they don't do this sort of sneaking, cruel thing. I'd give anything I've got in the world just for one half-hour with my lady, her and me!"

"My mother has nothing to do with it," repeated Arthur; but though he was convinced on this point, his mother, who had nothing to do with it, suddenly appeared to him as an enemy; and he, too, felt a hot resentment against her in his heart. And when he had taken Nancy home—which he did somewhat against her will, for she did not think his escort at all necessary—he rushed to Mr. Rolt, the lawyer, and poured such floods of wrath upon him that the veteran almost quailed. He wrote to Sir John that evening that Arthur was quite impracticable, and that "affairs must take their course." "If I had known earlier, something might have been done, for the parents did not seem unwilling to compromise," he wrote, which made Sir John, in his turn, curse the old formalist.

"If I had but gone myself!" he said.

Lady Curtis was completely innocent of this mission; perhaps she would not have disapproved of it, but certainly she herself would have gone more delicately to work. She was informed of it by a furious letter from Arthur, which cost her many tears.

"If it is your doing, mother, if you have thus insulted the girl who ought to be like your own daughter, then I can only say that you have lost your son," he wrote; and the two ladies in Berkeley Square shed tears of anguish and indignation over this cruel letter.

"This is likely to endear the girl to me, is it not?" said Lady Curtis, when she could speak.

"Oh, he does not mean it—he cannot mean it!" cried Lucy, with sobs in her voice.

"No," said the mother, unconsciously taking up Nancy's argument, with that curious contempt of the men involved in such a quarrel which is so strangely characteristic of women; "no, it is not him, it is her; and this is the influence my boy, my only boy, is to be under all his life!"

What could Lucy say? There was nothing further to be said or done.

And it may be supposed that as the day approached, and they knew that he who had been

the object of deepest concern and affection to both—the son who had been his mother's favorite, the brother whom his sister had looked up to and regarded with a semi-worship so long as he would let her—was about to go through the most important act of his life without their presence or sympathy, excitement ran very high in the veins of the two ladies.

Sir John called them home by every post, having in his mind a secret dread that they might do something or say something to compromise him, or at least themselves, in respect to Arthur; and Lady Curtis, without ever saying why, made excuses to remain, now a week, now a day longer. She did not even tell herself why; she would not allow the thought to form itself, that perhaps, even at the last moment, Arthur might appear, at least to ask her forgiveness and blessing, if not to tell her that he had repented and abandoned this evil way. She stayed in Berkeley Square, trembling every time there was a knock at the door, gazing wistfully from the window at passing cabs and carriages. When Durant came in a hansom, one wintry evening, he was received with open arms at the door; and the disappointment and impatience in Lady Curtis's face at the sight of him were very far from flattering.

"Oh!" she cried, "I thought it was—" and burst into tears.

When Lucy tried to say that he could not come now, that to desert his bride now would be unmanly and treacherous, her mother turned upon her with a dumb rage which was terrible to see. She hoped till the very eve of the marriage—the time fixed for which Durant had informed them of. And that evening Lucy made a prayer, which her mother was deeply angered by at first, but finally yielded to. Lucy begged, with tears, to be allowed to go and witness her brother's marriage, from a distance, at least. She promised to do nothing and say nothing which would betray her; to keep her veil down, not to speak to him, not to give him any token of her presence. All this Lucy promised, and at last she carried her point. They spent a miserable evening together, Durant coming in late to bring them the last news. He had found out the hour, and all about the wedding arrangements, and he was too happy to put himself at Lucy's service to escort her to Underhayes.

Lady Curtis's old maid, who had known Arthur all his life, and who could not be kept from knowing all the family affairs, was to go with them; and Durant pledged himself to meet them at the railway and take care of them, and see that they were protected from any contact with the family of Arthur's bride. In the prospect of this, Durant was, perhaps, not so downcast about Arthur's unhappy marriage as he ought to have been, and Lady Curtis surprised sundry signs of unseemly satisfaction in him.

"I do not think Mr. Durant is nearly so true a friend to my poor boy as I should have expected," she said, with a suspicious cloud on her face, when she went away.

"Oh, mamma, I am sure he is very fond of Arthur," said Lucy. She too had seen, perhaps, the glimpses of satisfaction which burst through his gravity; but then Lucy, better informed than her mother, set them down to the right cause.

"He may be fond of Arthur, but he does not see, as we do, that this is destruction to him," said Lady Curtis, putting her handkerchief to her wet eyes.

"I am sure he will be his warm friend in any trouble."

"Well, my dear, let us hope so; for he will want all his friends. I think so myself," said Lady Curtis. "In any trouble! What do you call this but trouble? If he had lost everything he had in the world, it would not be half so bad; but men have such strange ways of looking at things. If he were to break his leg or get a bad illness, which would not be half so serious—"

"Oh, mamma!" cried Lucy, putting out two fingers of her pretty hand to avert the evil omen.

"Well, well, you know that is not what I mean. God forbid my boy should be ill, away from home, among strangers!" cried Lady Curtis. "It would be strange if you had to *faire les cornes* for anything his mother said; but what would illness be in comparison with this? In that case, Mr. Durant would be perfect, I feel sure of it; but now—"

"I think he was pleased to see how your heart melted to poor Arthur, and to know of this," said Lucy, pointing to a letter which lay on the table. Was it for her to say that there was still something else which made Durant still more glad?

"Oh, Lucy! as if my heart required to be melted towards my son, my only boy!"

And then you may be sure Lucy cried: what could a girl do?

It can scarcely be said that these preparatory days were much more cheerful to Arthur. Everybody had dropped away from him. He had the prospect in a few days of what people are pleased to call happiness. He was to marry the bride of his choice, and to take her away with him, the two by themselves, the Elysium of the primitive imagination; and Arthur was very much in love. He believed that as soon as they got away, when he had once separated this rose of his from all the domestic thorns surrounding her, he would be perfectly happy. It was the one redeeming point in the difficulties of the moment that he entirely believed this.

Then, at least, he thought he was sure of blessedness; and that prospect made much possible that would not have been possible otherwise. But to be cut off from all companionship of his own class, even from Mr. Eagles, and the "men" who frequented Mr. Eagles's intellectual workshops; to be separated from his family, whom he loved, though he was angry with them; to have nothing to do, though on ordinary occasions he was not disposed to do very much—this isolation was very hard upon Arthur. He had no society but that of the Bateses' household, and was often left to amuse himself as he could in the stuffy parlor, without even Nancy, who had naturally a great many things to do on the eve of her wedding, which brides in rich households are not called upon to think of.

Arthur winced when he had to endure the companionship of the tax-collector or his son Charley, unsweetened by Nancy's presence; and it must be allowed that as the time approached which was to bind him forever to the family, his toleration of them, which during his courtship had been unbounded, began to give way. It began to be very hard to put up with Mr.

Bates's rum-and-water, and the railleries of Sarah Jane; and Matilda and Mrs. Bates, both of whom were "sensible," began to perceive this—the mother with resentment, the daughter with a certain sympathy. Matilda intimated to her mother that "it was touch and go with Arthur," and that she wasn't surprised; but the father and son and Sarah Jane remained happily unaware that they were not the best of company for Nancy's future husband, whom they called freely by his Christian name, making him "quite at home." This gave him an eagerness to push on the wedding, which was quite the proper thing in the circumstances.

He would have had it a week earlier, if he could have persuaded them to depart from any of the grandeur they intended; and as it was, he chafed and grumbled at the delay in a way which, as Mrs. Bates remarked, was "most flattering" for them all. But poor Arthur had no intention of flattering. He could do nothing but sit in his lodgings, or in the Bateses' parlor, and watch the progress of the hours. After the wedding he vowed to himself he would change all that; there would be an entire revolution in his life; he would escape with his Nancy into a better and fresher air; and when they asked about the return of the pair, he did his best to evade the question.

"I don't think we must bind ourselves to anything, Mrs. Bates. If Nancy likes Paris, we may stay there; or if we can get as far as Italy—"

"Oh, I sha'n't stay very long, mamma," said Nancy; "I dare say I shall soon get tired among foreigners."

"Shouldn't I like to see you!" cried Mrs. Bates—"you that know the language! What a good thing it is you that is going, and not Matilda or Sarah Jane."

"Oh, I should soon have got on," said the latter personage. "I should soon have picked it up—*commeng vous portez-vous?* I know a little already."

"But not like Nancy, who had French for five quarters at Miss Woodruff's, when your poor dear aunt was alive. My sister was one that thought a great deal of education—"

"I wish you would not all talk together!" said Nancy, whose temper was not improved by her important position. "I hated it. I never learned a word I could help. I'll let Arthur do all the talking; and as soon as ever we can, you'll see us home."

"On the contrary," said Arthur, with secret uneasiness, "you will like Paris so well that you will never wish to leave it—it is so gay and bright; and if we can go on as far as Italy, that is what I should like most."

"Anyhow, you will be back before Christmas?"

"Oh, Christmas! long before that!" said Nancy.

Arthur said nothing; but he recorded a vow in the depths of his heart.

CHAPTER XI.

DURANT met Lucy at the station on the morning of Arthur's wedding-day. She was under the charge of old Mrs. Davies, the confidential woman who had nursed Lady Curtis's children through their sicknesses, and petted them at all times and seasons since ever they were born. Lucy was very pale, but her distress was nothing to that of old Davies, who seemed to think it her duty to cry all the way, and heaved from time to time the bitterest sighs. "Oh, my dear young gentleman!" she said at intervals, "oh, Master Arthur! to think as I should have lived to see such a day!" This did not improve Lucy's spirits, who sat very pale in a corner, sometimes piteously lifting her eyes to Durant for sympathy. The day chosen for Arthur's marriage was the 1st of November, as inappropriate a moment for a wedding as could well be imagined—All-saints-day, the anniversary of death, not of bridal, and a gloomy morning, with a soft, persistent drizzle of rain, and skies that looked like lead. "I hope the sun will shine a little," said Lucy.

"Oh, Miss Lucy," said old Davies, "why should the sun shine? They can't expect no happiness, flying in the face of their parents like this."

Durant, who was not by a long way so melancholy as he ought to have been, did what he could to make the party more cheerful. How could he be otherwise than happy with Lucy seated opposite to him, travelling with him, with an air of belonging to him, which filled the young man's veins as with wine? Sometimes he almost could have believed that it was his own wedding-day, not Arthur's, and that something more than his most foolish hopes had been realized. Alas! on the contrary, did not Arthur's wedding make his own more hopeless than ever? Would the parents ever consent to a second unsatisfactory alliance? and what could a poor young barrister, grandson of a fortunate saddler, with the saddler's blood in his veins, but none of his money in his pockets, be, but a very unsatisfactory match for Sir John Curtis's daughter?

This thought did more than friendship to restore him to the state of mind becoming the occasion, and in harmony with his companions' mood; but yet by moments he forgot it, and half believed himself to be carrying Lucy off to Italy, as Arthur was about to carry his wife away from these dreary skies. How much happier he would have been than Arthur! as much happier as Lucy Curtis was more lovely, more beautiful, more desirable than the young virago Nancy Bates. If Lucy only had been more humbly born, less well endowed! how could he wish her less fair and sweet?

He had to hold an umbrella over her as he took her to the church in which the ceremony was to take place, and he liked the rain. Old Davies, who came stumping and crying after them in a waterproof, thought it the most miserable day she ever had seen; but the young pair under the umbrella, though they were very sad (or thought they were), did not so much dislike the day. Lucy was much afraid lest she should meet the party, and yet had a yearning to be recognized by accident by her brother, as well as a terror of it. She talked to Durant about this all the way, raising her pale face and those eyes which had the clearness of the skies after rain, and confiding all her feelings to him.

"If it was by accident there would be no

harm; could there be any harm? I would not put myself in the way; but if it happened—"

"You could not see him to-day, could you, without also seeing *her?*"

A tear dropped hastily upon his arm, and Lucy turned her head a little away to hide that her eyes were again full. "That is the worst of all," she said—"my only brother! and I shall never again be able to see him without *her*—that is the worst of all. Oh, Mr. Durant, I don't mean anything against marriage, for I suppose people are—often—happy; but it is not happy for other people, is it? It tears one away from all that belong to one—"

How hard it was for him to answer her! "This is an exceptional case," he said, his voice trembling a little, "but we must not be infidels to the highest happiness—and love."

"Oh, love!" cried Lucy, who was thinking of her brother with all the faculties of her being, although her heart was vaguely warmed and stilled unawares by the close neighborhood of this other who was not her brother. "Love! as if there was but one kind. I did not think *you* would have spoken so. Do not we love him, Mr. Durant? And yet he casts us off for some one he scarcely knows."

"He will come back to you; it cannot be that the separation is for long. Arthur is not the man—"

"Oh, Mr. Durant, you mean that he will not be happy? I don't want him to be unhappy. Oh, God forbid! and why should not he be happy," said Lucy, with tearful inconsistency, "if he loves her?" What could Durant say? He could think of nothing but the foolishest, most traitorous, dishonorable things, dishonorable to the trust put in him, treacherous to the confidence with which she held his arm. The very tightening of her hold, when they met other passers-by on the narrow pavement, made him feel himself the basest of men, when he felt those unsayable words flutter to his lips—yet made them only flutter the more. He was glad to be able to put his companion into a deep pew in the old-fashioned church, underneath the gallery, where it would be doubly impossible for any one to see her. Lucy pulled her cloak closely round her, and drew her veil over her face. Mrs. Davies was short, and was almost lost in the depth of the pew—and they were all very glad that the church was still encumbered with this old-fashioned lumber, and that no restorations as yet had been commenced. Durant seated himself still farther back. It was a gloomy place—an old church, low-roofed and partly whitewashed.

The east window looked out into a great oak, which, with its yellow leaves, was the only thing that seemed to give a little light. The dreary lines of pews seemed to add to the dismal character of the scene, the half-daylight, the rain drizzling, the old pew-opener going about in pattens—no carpet laid down for the bridal feet, or any "fuss" made. Why should any "fuss" be made about Bates the tax-collector's daughter? And no one was disposed to do honor to Arthur, but rather the reverse, as a young man forsaking his caste, and setting the worst of examples to all other young men.

Now and then somebody would come in with a sound of closing umbrellas, and swinging of the doors, and come noisily up the aisle and drop into a pew. Girls, like Sarah Jane, in cheap hats with cheaper feathers, who sat and whispered, and laughed, and looked about them, and women of Mrs. Bates's own type, with big shawls and nondescript bonnets, came to see the Bateses' triumph with no very friendly sympathy. The dreariest scene! Durant sat behind and looked at it all with his heart beating.

In the general commotion in which his mind was, he too could have cried, as Lucy was doing over Arthur. How different was all this from the circumstances that ought to have attended the "happiest day of his life!" Would it be the happiest day of his life?—or, perhaps, the most miserable? And yet, if the spectator could have taken the hand of that pale girl in front of him and led her up to that dingy altar, how soon would he have forgotten all the circumstances! The damp-breathing place, the clammy pews, the squalor of the rain, the absence of all beauty and tokens of delight, what would they have done but make his happiness show all the brighter? Would the effect be the same with Arthur too? They had very soon an opportunity of judging; for Arthur came in suddenly by himself, looking anything but ecstatic.

Fortunately, Durant thought, Lucy did not see him, her head being bent and covered with her hands. But Durant himself watched the bridegroom with feelings which he could not have described—a mixture of pity, and envy, and fellow-feeling, and contempt. That a man who was the brother of Lucy Curtis should throw away everything for Nancy Bates! and yet to have it in your power to throw away everything for love, to give the woman you had chosen, if she were only Nancy Bates, such a proof of affection, absolute and unmixed!

But Arthur scarcely seemed conscious himself of that fine position. He was very pale, with an excited look about the eyes which gave him a worn and exhausted aspect. He was feeling to the bottom of his soul the squalor, the dinginess, the damp, and the gloom. What a day it was to be married on! What a place to be married in! What dismal surroundings! Old Bates and Charley, and the uncle from Wapping, and not one familiar face to look kindly at him, to wish him happiness in a voice that was dear!

He sat down in the front, gazing blankly, like Durant, at the oak-tree that shed a little color from its autumn leaves. It reminded him, by some fantastic trick of association, of the trees at home. Would he ever see that home again? The disjunction from everything he had cared for, from all he knew, came over him with a forlorn sense of desolation and solitude—on his wedding-day! Arthur felt he was doing wrong to his bride, but how could he help it? He, too, covered his face with his hands. Durant felt that if Lucy saw him she would rush to him, in indifference to all appearances; but she did not know he had passed her so quietly, all alone.

And then the few spectators began to whisper and stir, and turn their heads to the door; and a carriage was heard to stop. Lucy raised her head and put back her veil a little. She gazed breathless at the bride, who came up the aisle on her father's arm. Nancy was dressed in simple white muslin, the resources of the family having been concentrated on the "silk" in which she was to take her departure from home. But

she had a veil, like the most fashionable of brides, and a crown of orange-blossoms such as would have put most brides to shame. Lucy gazed at her, more and more forgetting that she herself ought not to be seen, and her heart swelled with a mixture of attraction and repulsion. That dress and that moment equalize conditions.

A woman cannot be more than a bride if she should be a queen. Nancy had a right to be considered as the type of all youth and womanhood, as much as if she had been the most exalted of women. Arthur was but a poor type of the other side, but for her there was no drawback, except the rain, and she had not been conscious of the rain. With her head a little drooped, but her pretty figure erect, she walked up the aisle, leaning on her shabby old father's arm like a lily, notwithstanding the meanness of the prop. She was happy; she was serious; full of awe, which gave delicacy to her looks and movements, uncertain yet serene upon the threshold of her life.

Durant, who had no prejudice, became an instant convert to her as she passed him, virginal, abstracted, a vision of whiteness and serious, tender mystery. And Lucy, who was moved against her will, could do nothing but gaze, forgetting herself, till old Davies sighed so loud and shook her head so persistently that her young mistress took fright.

It was not a wedding that occupied much time. There was no music, no nuptial hymn or wedding march for Nancy Bates, and the two spectators who were most interested had scarcely recovered from their thrill of excitement when the stir about the altar told that it was all over, and the party going to the vestry to sign the register. This was the signal for the other people present to open their pew-doors, and pull up their shawls, and lift their damp umbrellas; and Sarah Jane, who was full of excitement and satisfaction, proud of her white bonnet and her new frock, came tripping down the aisle to speak to some of those companions of her own, whose dingy dresses made such a wonderful contrast to her own bright and gay garb.

"Didn't she behave beautiful? hasn't it gone off well?" said Sarah Jane, triumphing over every one who was not in pink muslin. And while she stood giving information of the future movements of the bridal pair, describing fully where "Arthur" was about to take Nancy, Durant bent forward to endeavor to induce Lucy to leave. He had forgotten all about Sarah Jane, but she had not forgotten him. She gave a little scream of surprise, and looked eagerly at the half-veiled young lady. Then she rushed off, forgetting even her pink muslin, and calling audibly on Arthur as she approached the door of the vestry, which the rest of the party had entered.

"Arthur! Arthur!" she called, rushing in among them, "there's one of your people there—"

"Hold your tongue!" said her mother, in alarm. "Sarah Jane, recollect you're in church!"

"I'm speaking to Arthur, mamma. There's one of your people there, as sure as—as sure as anything, and Mr. Durant with her. He did not see me," cried Sarah Jane, with an angry blush, "but I know him; and there's a young lady and an old lady."

"And quite natural too, and I'm very glad of it," said Mrs. Bates. "Fancy my staying away if it was Charley's wedding! I'll go and ask my lady to come and have a bit of dinner."

"It must be a mistake," said Arthur, paler than ever; "it cannot be my mother."

He put out his hand to stop Mrs. Bates; then he stood aghast, gazing after her. He could not leave his newly made bride, and how could he meet his mother's eyes?

"Oh, go—go," said Nancy; "you needn't mind me." Then she herself melted, touched by the situation. "Yes, go, Arthur. I will wait for you," she said, with something that looked almost like dignity.

He dared not take her with him. He went with mingled eagerness and reluctance, wondering, affected, ready to bless his mother, or to cast off all duty to her forever.

He found Mrs. Bates haranguing old Davies, his mother's maid, calling her "my lady," and begging that she would do them the honor to come to the wedding breakfast.

"I don't pretend to call it breakfast, it's more like what your ladyship would call a lunch; but the young folks must have something substantial before they start on their journey—and we'll take it so friendly, and such an honor. It is just what we were wanting, and not daring to hope for, my lady," said Mrs. Bates, beaming. "Arthur, you can tell her ladyship—"

"Why, Davies, you!" cried Arthur, sharply, stung by sudden rage. "What are you doing here?"

"Davies! Ain't she my lady, after all?" cried Mrs. Bates.

Lucy had been almost crouching in a corner of the pew; but when she saw her brother's troubled and worn face she could not restrain herself.

"Oh, Arthur, how could you think mamma would come?" she said. "How could she come, after the letter you sent her? But we could not let it be without one near you that loved you; and I am here," said Lucy, coming forward, putting back her veil, the tears rushing to her eyes.

Arthur was overcome by the sight of her, by the voice, by the incident altogether. He was so much excited and overcome that he could have cried too. He took his sister's outstretched hands, and kissed her cheek.

"Lucy, I will never forget this! Come and speak to Nancy, and then they can take you away."

Here Durant came forward, with a feeling that he would be condemned on all sides.

"I don't think Lady Curtis meant that your sister should see any one," he said.

"Lucy, I suppose you are old enough to choose for yourself. Is he the keeper of your conscience?" cried Arthur.

Lucy looked at her guardian, with a faint, deprecatory smile quivering on her lip.

"I must," she said; "I must! How can I help it?"

She seemed to ask his permission; and w was he, that he should give or withhold per sion? He stood aside, and with reluctant ha opened the pew-door.

Just then Nancy, tired of waiting, and by potent curiosity, came f had thrown back her bridal

that there should be a certain defiant expression on her face. She strolled towards them with an appearance of carelessness, a cavalier air. Nancy's heart was beating loudly enough. She was afraid of the ladies whom she might be about to face, but that only made her put on a bolder and more saucy aspect. She was half wounded that he should have left her for a moment, half anxious for the result, and really eager and wistful, wishing to please if she could, had any one been able to see into her heart. But an image of more complete defiance and saucy freedom than this girl, with her veil put up in a crumpled mass, approaching with a bold swing of her person and a loud-sounding step, could not have been found. All her virginal grace, her tender bridehood and womanhood, seemed to have suddenly flown.

Lucy looked up at her and quailed; her lip quivered more and more; she looked at Durant with an appeal, she looked at Arthur with a pitiful glance. Finally, she stepped forward, and said, softly,

"I must not stay. I wish you may be very, very happy, you and my brother. Oh, Arthur, you know I wish you happy!" Then she made a pause, for Nancy gave no response. "I am sorry," she went on, faltering, "that it has all been so unhappy—that we have not known you—that Arthur has been so unkind; but it is not our fault."

"Oh, it does not matter," said Nancy. She was touched by the look of the girl who stood before her, but to give in was impossible. "It doesn't matter a bit. I don't suppose we should have got on, had we known each other. It is better it should be as it is."

And with this she turned and walked slowly back towards the vestry, turning her back upon them. Lucy stood still for a moment in dismay. Then she said, breathless,

"Good-bye, Arthur, good-bye! Davies will give you a letter, but don't open it now. Good-bye, and God bless you! Take me away, Mr. Durant, take me away. Come, come," she said, hastening him as they got to the door. "I shall be crying again if we don't go, I am so silly. I don't care for the rain, only come, come away."

Then they were out-of-doors again in the wet street, at a distance even from old Davies, who came hobbling after them, the rain blowing in their faces, everything over. Lucy clung to his arm and hurried him on, choking the sobs that would come into her throat.

"How can I forgive myself?" he cried. "I have allowed you to be insulted—I, who would not let the wind blow on you if I had my will."

She remembered this after, and his agitated look, but did not see them then.

"Oh, it is not that," she said. "It does not matter, as she told me. But oh, Arthur! he does not belong to us any longer, he cares nothing about us!" cried Lucy, with the shock of discovery which no previous preparation in the mind can lessen.

She had said, as she came, that her brother was severed from his family; but now she saw it with her eyes, and felt the sharpness of the fact, so different from anticipation. Durant was full of a hundred compunctions, as if he had been the cause. He would have said philosophically enough to his own sister that it was the course of nature; but it seemed horrible, unnatural, that such a thing should happen to Lucy. The little suppressed sobs that came from her at intervals, as they went back to the train, seemed to rend his own heart.

CHAPTER XII.

THOUGH it was his wedding-day, and though he was an impassioned lover, it would be impossible to describe the sensation of despair with which Arthur saw his sister and his friend hurry out of the church. His bride had left him on the other side, turning her back upon him. He was left there, with Mrs. Bates and old Davies! There was a tragical-ludicrous air about the group which seemed the very culmination of that squalor of the weather and the surroundings, which not even Nancy's bridal wreath and Sarah Jane's pink muslin could counteract.

Mrs. Bates and Mrs. Davies were fitly matched. They were ready to fly at each other's throats, metaphorically, as they stood there, confronting each other—Mrs. Bates red with confusion and wrath to think that she should have called this *person* my lady, and Davies dissolved in tears and speechless with indignation. What had young Arthur to do between them? They seemed like symbolical emblems of his fate. No longer to have to do with the beautiful things of this earth, grace, cultivation, loveliness; but with the meaner conditions, the bare, unattractive prose of existence. Everything that was shabby and rusty and poor had taken the place of all that was lovely and pleasant and of good report. Beauty and youth were evanescent qualities; they would flit away even from his bride; and what had he to look forward to but another Mrs. Bates as his final companion?

This horrible idea did not communicate itself in so many words, but it flitted vaguely upon the air, giving Arthur a sudden horror of Mrs. Bates, who had taken the place of his mother, as it seemed. He turned away to follow Nancy, but was stopped by old Davies, who called out a despairing "Oh, Master Arthur!" and put a letter, wet with unnecessary tears, into his hand.

"Is it from my mother, Davies?" he said.

"I don't know, sir, if it's my lady or Miss Lucy. I was to have took it; I wasn't to have seen you; but now as I have seen you— Oh, Master Arthur, Master Arthur, how could you, sir!" cried Davies, with streaming eyes and uplifted hands.

He turned away with rage in his heart, clenching his hand involuntarily; but at that moment Mrs. Bates interfered, and changed the current of Arthur's feelings.

"You are a most impertinent person!" said Mrs. Bates. "How dare you speak to my son-in-law so? and in church, too! Though you are only a servant, you ought to know better!"

"Davies!" cried Arthur, rushing back and taking the old woman's hands, "go after Lucy—quick! She is alone. But first say, 'God bless you!' dear old Davies. There never was a time that you did not say 'God bless you' before!"

"And I will say it!" cried the old woman. "I will say it, never mind who hears. Oh, Master Arthur, dear, God bless you! But you've broke my lady's heart, and Miss Lucy's too."

"Run after her—go, Davies, go. My sister is alone," cried Arthur, giving her such a grasp of his young hands, and turning her round towards the door with such impetuosity, that poor old Davies all but tripped upon the matting in the aisle.

He thrust the letter into his pocket and went back to Nancy, who stood at the vestry-door looking round for him, with nothing but disdain in her face, and little but dismay in her heart.

"If he leaves me like this now, what will he do after?" Nancy was saying to herself; and though she loved him dearly, and though it was a great marriage for Nancy Bates, her heart quailed for the moment at the difficulties before her, and she repented of the step she had just taken. She stood up against the vestry-door, defying her bridegroom and all his belongings, as it seemed, with dilated nostrils, and curled lips, and insolent gaze. But in her heart, what a darkness of despair was quivering about poor Nancy! What had she done? Plunged into a new world, which was all against her, which was superior to her, in which she had nothing but Arthur, who already, ten minutes after he had pledged her his faith, had deserted her — for *them!* Oh, how much better to have stayed by the old mother, the shabby father who loved her! Her whole inner being was quivering with this pang of sudden desolation and enlightenment. But with what a look of disdain and defiance she regarded her bridegroom as he came back to her! no softening in her eyes, however much there might be in her heart.

"Forgive me, Nancy," he said, gently. "You have a right to be vexed; but don't turn from me, my darling, as if I were unworthy a look."

"It is you who think me unworthy a look!" she cried, "you and your fine-lady sister, and all your grand friends. Oh, I am sure you would much rather go to them. If they had only come yesterday instead of to-day!"

"Hush, hush!" he said, taking her unwilling hand. She was everything he had in the world now, and any stirrings of anger that might rise in his mind were speedily suppressed by the emergency. People have more dominion even over their feelings than they think. He got rid of the resentment which springs so quickly when the nerves are overstrung and the mind excited by simple force of the position; for if he allowed himself to quarrel with Nancy, what remained to him? The situation was impossible. He drew her hand within his arm. "Is everybody ready?" he said. "We have not much time to lose. Come!" he added, lower. "Darling, we are going to leave all the trouble behind, both on your side and my side."

"There is no trouble on my side!"

"Well, then, on mine; we are leaving it all behind. Is not everything happiness, everything delight, beyond this church-door?"

She could not continue the controversy; for Arthur's face had regained the lover-look which Nancy had felt the absence of all that strange morning. She had to walk by his side, with her arm in his; and his soft words and glowing looks, and the way in which he held her hand upon his arm, gradually stole at once the misery and the defiance out of her heart. She began to forget the untoward details, and to feel only the thrill of this mysterious thing which had happened. That she was no longer Nancy Bates, but Mrs. Arthur Curtis, to be my Lady Curtis some time —no longer a poor girl, the tax-collector's daughter, but a lady! All in a moment this mystic change had been made.

And she *was* changed; she felt it, with a sudden revulsion of sentiment. The laugh of Sarah Jane behind her filled her with a half-impatient shame. She was annoyed to hear her mother telling over the just concluded incident. She herself had a right to be angry, but what had they to do with Miss Curtis's visit? Lucy's visit! that was what her brother's wife had a right to call her; but "the Bateses" had no right to interfere at all. Had Arthur said this, she would have blazed into high resentment, and declared her family to be as good, if not better, than his; but in the seclusion of her private soul, a seclusion not yet in any way impaired by the fact that she was married, this was how she was thinking.

It gave her a sense of importance that Lucy had come. She had taken no notice of Arthur's family, but they had been compelled to take notice of her. And in time to come, when she might have many battles to fight with them, it would be well to have this fact in hand. Accordingly, when the party arrived at home, it was Nancy who silenced her mother, whose indignation against Arthur for allowing her to address old Nurse Davies as my lady was great.

"Mamma, you will just stop that!" said Nancy. "You went out of the room in a hurry before Arthur knew. Was it his fault?"

Mrs. Bates was thunderstruck. She had thought of a great many things that might happen, sooner than that Nancy should take up the cudgels for her new family.

"Bless us all!" she said, "is it a reason that no one should dare to speak, because you are Mrs. Arthur Curtis?"

But it was not a moment to quarrel. And when, after the meal which Mrs. Bates had thought Lady Curtis would call a luncheon, the mother and sisters left the table with the bride, in a body, to change her dress, according to the well-understood formula of marriages, there was nothing but affection and tears, as is becoming at such a moment. There were no strangers present at the meal. It had been the strong desire of Sarah Jane that Mr. Raisins should be invited—he who it was understood was likely to cause another "wedding in the family" before long. But this had not been permitted, partly on account of Arthur, partly because there was no room.

"We must have your uncle Sam, and how are we to squeeze in another?" Mrs. Bates had asked; and all Sarah Jane's indignant protestations about the impossibility of a wedding "without one young man" were silenced by the physical impossibility.

The limited number of the party threw away much of the supposed festive effect from the repast. But for the wedding the table, it might have been a very domestic dinner; and even Sarah Jane's muslin was of little use to her, and it is to speak of, upon her spirits, were a few people on solation might have

The little party people seated ro

Arthur could make could keep from his mind a sense of the grotesque incongruity of the scene. People who were passing peered in at the window to see the wedding-party, and get a glimpse of the bride. Arthur had found the parlor an earthly paradise at almost every other hour; but he had not been in the habit of coming at this hour. He had never even seen the family at their early dinner; and to have his health drunk by Uncle Sam from Wapping was a new experience to him.

"I hope as you'll both be happy, Mr. Curtis, and that you'll have every satisfaction in Nancy," said Mr. Sam Bates, solemnly drinking a glass of the brown and filmy port which they all pledged the bride and bridegroom in. He looked at her as if she had been an article just sold, with a calculation of all the uses she might be put to, as he hoped she would give satisfaction. "I have heard a deal of my niece Nancy, and I know she's had a many advantages," he said. "I hope she'll act up to them, Mr. Curtis, and give you every satisfaction in the married state."

This was the toast of the day, and they all hoped that Arthur would have got up and made a speech; and when he only said, "I am much obliged to you, Mr. Bates," they were all a trifle disappointed, especially on account of Uncle Sam, who they felt required some practical proof that Nancy's husband was, in reality, the very fine gentleman and member of the upper classes which they had represented him to be—not perceiving that Sam's speech of itself proved his perception of the fact.

And it was very strange that all these details, which would have amused Arthur greatly, with a kindly amusement without any gall in it, when he first began to come to the house, and which, even up to a very recent period, he would have regarded with amiable toleration, should have become unendurable to him now, at the very moment when he had become legally a member of the household party, and had more reason than ever before to judge them charitably, and look upon their doings and sayings with indulgent eyes; but so it was. How this should be, it is hard to explain, but it was quite natural to feel; and it is scarcely possible to exaggerate the impatience that was in his mind to get away, and to carry Nancy away. She was his now. "There was no longer any occasion for him," he said, unconsciously to himself, "to put up with this." He was enfranchised. Soon there would be land and sea, miles and leagues of it, of English soil and foreign ground, between them; and it would be his own fault if he exposed himself to another dinner in that parlor. When Nancy went away to change her dress, attended by her mother and sisters, Mr. Bates got out the rum, and called to "the girl" for hot water.

"You'll take a drop, before you start, for luck," he said; and though Arthur would not take any, Sam Bates was very willing to do so. The smell of it sickened the young man, for the first time fastidious and critical. He got up and went to the window, to look for the carriage which was coming to take his bride and himself away. They were going to Dover direct, to cross in a day or two. How he counted the moments till he could get out into the fresh air, however damp and gloomy, never, with his will, to come back here any more.

But another shock awaited poor Arthur when Nancy came down-stairs attired in the "silk" which was the crown of her little trousseau. It was light and thin, and rustled much, and was of a kind of salmon-color, between pink and brown, largely trimmed with flounces and fringes and bits of lace—every kind of florid ornamentation. The women were so proud of the effect that Nancy was brought down-stairs with the little brown jacket on her arm which she was to wear over this resplendent garb, which, it seemed to Arthur's eyes, might have been worn at a flower-show on a brilliant day of summer; for he was not sufficiently trained in details to be aware how the cheap elaboration of Nancy's gown would have showed among the costlier productions of fashion.

"My! what a swell!" cried Charley Bates, while the two elders looked up complaisant from their rum-and-water. It was indeed a proud moment for the family.

"The thought I've had over this dress!" said the proud mother, with a pull here and a pinch there to the cracking folds, "for you see there were so many things to think of—the present moment isn't everything; and if she takes care of it, it will be quite good for next summer, and always a handsome dress for an occasion. And then if they meet friends, and are asked out of an evening, there she is! What could be better? You may say she's a swell—but lasting was in my mind."

"It's a splendid costoom," said Uncle Sam. "I hope there's a something in the pocket for luck. And very pretty you look in it, Nancy, and I wish you health to wear it, my dear, and plenty more when that's done."

"She must not look for many like this," said Mrs. Bates; "not just at present, till Sir John comes round. Parents may stretch a point, but I would never have a young woman be hard upon her husband. Turn round, dear, and show the basques. I never saw a dress that did Miss Snips more credit. But Arthur don't give his opinion. A shawl! Oh, if that isn't like a man! Cover her up in a shawl on her wedding-day!"

"But what if she catches cold on her wedding-day?" said poor Arthur.

He put his hand caressingly on the pinkness of the shoulder, and looked at his bride with all the show of admiration which he could put on to hide his secret horror. He was worn out with excitement and emotion, which, no doubt, was the reason why this final accident gave him such a shiver of horror.

Nancy, who had grown suspicious as he grew fastidious, took fire instantly. She flung away from his caressing touch.

"I'd better go up-stairs again and put on my old merino!" she cried, with a flush of passion, wheeling round with indignant impetuosity, and a fury of disappointment in her heart. They all caught and held her, while she struggled to get free.

"She was always like that," cried her mother. "She never could bear a word about her things. Nancy, dear, it ain't that he doesn't like it. It's all his anxiety for you."

"My dear Nancy, the carriage is here," cried Arthur, half frantic. "We shall lose the train. The dress is beautiful, but the day is cold and wet—"

"Don't you see, dear, he don't want you to spoil your lovely dress—"

"And be as hoarse as an old crow all the honey-moon," said the amiable Matilda. "That's what Arthur is thinking of, and right too! And here's my new shawl, that I brought down on purpose. Look at the coachman, off of his box, looking in!"

This reduced them all to calm. The coachman sat serenely overhead, contemplating the scene in the parlor with much satisfaction. His attention, however, was chiefly centred in the steaming rum-and-water, which, though it disgusted Arthur, looked very comfortable to the damp cabman in the drizzle, who was elderly, and had no particular interest in the bride. "Lord, how some folks does enjoy themselves!" he was saying in his secret soul. And, fortunately, there was no more time to think of the dress. Matilda wrapped her sister in her big shawl, and they all pressed round with kisses and farewells, of which Arthur had his share. He did not like them to kiss him, but how could he help it? He was on his good behavior, ready to accept and forgive everything so long as he could get away.

And when they at last drove from the door, what a relief it was! The Bateses all stood in a circle outside, waving good-byes and yet more kisses, not heeding either the rain or the draggled spectators who stood by. Nor were the other missiles wanting which are common on such occasions. An old white shoe, one of those which Sarah Jane had danced to pieces on the night of the Volunteers' ball, thrown violently after them, glanced in at the window, and fell on the opposite seat as they set out. Never was there a more squalid spell discharged at the shy and doubtful happiness for which Arthur Curtis had paid so great a price. He took it between his finger and thumb and pitched it out of the window. Perhaps that, too, was an injudicious step to take.

"I think you might have gone a little farther off before you showed my folks how you despise them, Arthur!" cried Nancy, with flaming cheeks.

Poor Arthur! there was not much laughter in his mood. But he made an effort to be light-hearted and gay.

"It was too dirty for anything," he said, laughing; and then he drew her within his arm, and said, "At last, Nancy! only you and I!"

"Yes; you have got rid of them all at last," said Nancy, making an effort to resist.

But, after all, they were in love with each other, and had been married that morning. The incipient hostility dropped, and he forgave her dress, and she forgave his criticism. Her manners were as imperfect as her gown; but now she was free from all influences that were perverse, and she was his Nancy—his bride, the girl he loved, the object of his choice. He had paid dearly for the prize he was carrying away. It was not the time, certainly, to look out for flaws in that prize now.

Thus they set off on their honey-moon, poor inexperienced young souls! He persuaded her, with no great difficulty, to stay in London first for a few days, hoping to be able to correct the dress; for how could he take her to France, where dress means something, to travel in November in a salmon-colored silk gown? This may seem a poor sort of thing to occupy a bridegroom's thoughts. But then the vehemence of a reformer and missionary was added in Arthur's case to the new sense of responsibility that was upon him. He must make her perfect—if he could.

CHAPTER XIII.

The long avenue at Oakley was as dreary as the damp street of Underhayes. The rain drizzling, a constant soft downfall—half of the chilly shower, half of the yellow leaves—going on without intermission. Here and there one of the great oaks, from which the place had its name, stood up all russet and solid, with the dry leaves clinging to its branches; here were feeble flutters of denuded sycamore and lime, there elms standing up in a forlorn faded greenness, all rusty, shabby, ragged, their year's clothing worn out. The house itself appeared in glimpses as they drove along, gray and cold, with its broad, low front stretching along the damp terraces, which were so green with the wet as to put everything out of harmony.

The neighborhood was proud of Oakley Hall, which was said to be pure Italian, Palladian, or something finer still, if there is any finer word. It had an imposing front, with pediments and pillars, supposed to be white, but at present the very color of cold, damp and mournful. Lady Curtis shivered as they drove along, sighting it by glimpses, now more, now less distinctly through the trees. It was her home, but there was not much sympathy between the lively, quick-feeling woman and the blank splendor of the cold, long-drawn-out house. She was never fond of it at any time. What she would have given for red brick! But Palladio was very much more dignified, if not so kindly. "How dismal we shall be without Arthur!" she said as they approached.

They had not talked very much to each other on the journey. All that could be said about Arthur had been said on the night of Lucy's return from Underhayes, but it was not possible to keep absolute silence about him now. The house was so full of Arthur! they seemed to see him upon the steps, in the avenue, appearing across the park with his gun. And now he had disappeared from the place. Their own sudden departure, when they first heard of his folly, had broken up the lingering remnant of a shooting-party which had assembled at Oakley, chiefly for Arthur's pleasure, but which no persuasions had induced Arthur to join. Now the men and their guns were all gone, and there was an interval of quiet before them till Christmas, when Sir John's habitual party of parliamentary friends would assemble. Nothing but mourning could interfere with that; and, "We can't put on mourning for Arthur, though God knows we might, if separation was all that was meant by it," said Lady Curtis.

"Oh, mamma!" said Lucy, with her usual tone of gentle remonstrance.

Lady Curtis was very quick and outspoken. She said a great many things with her lips which people in general say only in their mind. Lucy *faisait*

her mother spoke of mourning for Arthur. The suggestion was intolerable to her. It threw an additional cloud upon the dreary streaming avenue and the gray blank of the eyeless house.

Sir John, who was in reality expecting them anxiously, did not come to the door to meet them, being a little too late in moving from his chair in the library, which was his way. There were often advantages in it; and perhaps today, as on other occasions, it was just as well that it was in his library he received his wife and daughter, instead of meeting them in the full sight of the servants.

Sir John was a tall, gray-haired man, with a sort of homely dignity about him. He was not clever, and often enough the ladies felt it was difficult to get an idea into his head; and when the idea was in his head, he was in the way of treating it somewhat hardly, as if it was a thing rather than an idea. He could not play with plans and intentions, as his wife's quick mind loved to do; and when he received a blow, it crushed him with a sort of solid monotony to which there was no relief. He had not believed it possible that Arthur would persevere with a marriage which was so seriously against his interests, and had thought it only "some of my lady's nonsense" to think that this very fact would make Arthur more decided in throwing himself away. But now that the thing was done, he would allow no hope in it. His son was lost—the prey, probably, of a bad, certainly of a designing woman, seeking her own interests alone. He might as well die at once, for any good that was likely to come of him now. And in consequence of this determination on the part of Sir John that such a thing could not happen, the final act in the drama having taken him entirely by surprise, notwithstanding all warnings, had shaken him enormously in his health as well as in his immediate comfort. "He might as well be dead," he had said, after he knew that there was no more hope; and those were the words which he repeated by way of greeting to his wife and daughter.

"He might as well be dead at once; why did you let him do it?" he cried. "If I had ever thought he could have been such a fool, I should have taken care to be on the spot myself," said Sir John.

He had no curiosity about his son, where he was going—what he was doing. He might as well have been dead. To be sure, when he himself was dead, Arthur must come back and reign in his state; but then Sir John felt no necessity within himself that he should ever die. It was so far off, that it was unnecessary to calculate upon that remote contingency; and in the mean time it was his son who had departed out of this life—left it altogether, without possibility of return. He had spent these last few days very mournfully in the solitude of his vast house. One or two intimate friends had come to see him, but he had not cared to receive their visits. The rector had been there for a long time that very day preaching strange doctrines: that a thing being done could not be undone, and that it would be wise now to make the best of everything that happened. The rector was a Curtis too, Sir John's own nephew; and though he was shocked by this domestic incident, he was aware that it would be best not to allow it to come to anything scandalous. He had ventured to suggest that, perhaps, things might turn out better than they appeared. "Better!" said Sir John; "he might as well have been dead!"

He had been able to think of nothing else since he had heard of it; and his thoughts of Arthur were all of the kind which come into the minds of those who have lost their children. All the old forgotten nursery stories came back to him. What a boy he was—so active, so strong, such a good shot for his years, ready to ride at anything, and with an opinion of his own on politics, and all that.

While he sat in his library pretending to read and write (and what is it that elderly gentlemen find to do when they are shut up for day after day, pretending to read and write in their libraries?) these fancies came surging up about him exactly as if Arthur had been dead. He would put down his paper suddenly to think out a little joke of his when he was five, or a school-boy prank at fifteen. What promise, what ability! a hundred times cleverer than ever I was! and all to end in this! The dull surprise in his mind was inexhaustible; how could he be such a fool—how could he commit moral suicide in this way? And why had not his mother put a stop to it? This dull misery which he was suffering did not affect Sir John's ordinary habits; he went on, to all outward appearance, just as usual. He fulfilled every duty he had been accustomed to; ate at the usual times, took all the usual courses at dinner, and presented an imperturbable countenance to the butler and the footman who waited upon him; but his heart was heavy with the thought of his son who was lost. Though he was so glad to have his wife and daughter back again, he met them almost with reproaches.

"You went away, but you have not done any good," he said. "I expected little, but still you might have been of some use—and you have been of no use. It is exactly as if he were dead."

"Oh, papa, not that!" cried Lucy; but Lady Curtis only cried as she dropped into the big chair by the fire to get a little warmth. She felt at first as if her husband had a right to reproach her, notwithstanding that she had done everything she could; for she had left him with perhaps a boast of her own influence, and with very high hopes. It had seemed to her that Arthur must yield; and not only had Arthur not yielded, but all the harm that had been threatened was accomplished, and their only son was lost to them. She could not contradict what Sir John said. She was humbled, she who had been so confident; she had gone away almost promising to bring him back with her, confident in her power over her boy. Never before had her husband gained such an advantage. He had a kind of right to gibe at her henceforward, if he chose to exercise it. She had nothing to answer to him. It was quite true what he had said. What difference would it have made had the boy died?

"I never thought it would come to this," said Sir John; "not that I believed in your remonstrances, but I could not have believed that the fellow was such a fool. What does he suppose he will make by it? He had everything that heart could desire—a good allowance, a good

home; and to go and cut his own throat, as it were—to make an end of himself! He might just as well have done it at once. He will never be of any good again."

"It is quite true, it is quite true," said Lady Curtis; "all that your papa says is true." Her heart was so wrung that she scarcely knew whom she was addressing—Arthur, who had gone away in his disobedience, or Lucy, in whom there were faint appearances of standing up for her brother. The mother would not divest herself of the sense of a domestic audience to be convinced, whom perhaps their papa might be effectual with, though she had failed herself.

"What he could think he was to gain by it!" Sir John resumed, encouraged by this support, which he did not always receive from his wife. "Debt, and that sort of thing, is bad enough, and we know how young men are drawn into it; but what could anybody suppose this was going to be but ruin and destruction? What could he think there was to gain?"

"Oh, papa!" Lucy could not keep silence any longer. It was not the habit of the house to allow papa to have everything his own way. When Arthur's youthful peccadilloes had been discussed hitherto, Lady Curtis, however she might object to his conduct, had always been his champion with his father, and one of the greatest marvels and most confusing circumstances of all was this silence on her part, and surrender, as it were, of Arthur to be crushed as Sir John pleased. Lucy could not be still and hear it all. "Oh, papa!" she cried, "you speak as if poor Arthur thought of nothing but his own interest: was he so selfish? You know that he never thought of what was for his interest at all. Cannot you believe that he loved her, and that this was his motive?"

"My dear," said Sir John, "I was not speaking to you. You stand up for one another, as is natural. But see, even your mother has not a word to say."

This roused Lady Curtis from her depression: "I disapprove of it as much as you can do, John; I am as unhappy; but still I do not think there was any calculation in Arthur's mind. How should there have been? It was the height of foolishness and wicked hastiness, but he knew he could get nothing by it—he knew it was ruin, as you say."

"Why did he do it, then?" cried Sir John with outspread hands, appealing to heaven and earth, his eyebrows raised, shaking his head and looking about as if for an answer. Perhaps he felt his son's defection the most of all of them; although when all was well with Arthur he was not one of the fathers who cultivate their sons unduly, but, on the contrary, was often impatient of Lady Curtis's interest in anything connected with the boy, and her anxiety about him. "What could happen to him?" Sir John was in the habit of saying, when, as sometimes happened, there would be a commotion in the house because Arthur did not write often enough. "Depend upon it, he is all right." This had been his mood before; but now he seemed to miss Arthur wherever he turned. A thousand questions seemed to arise on which he would have liked to consult him; he wanted him to shoot a too well-preserved preserve; he wanted him to say what he thought about those new cottages which had to be built. Sir John did not see the need of new cottages; *he* did not want a new house, he was contented with his old one; and why should not other people be content? But in case the cottages should be forced upon him, he should have liked to know what Arthur thought. Now that he was gone, there seemed to arise some special reason for appealing to him almost every day. It was as if he had died.

And there was a long silence in the big still room, where the family had met together after their misfortune. How few families are there which have not known such sorrowful silences—when there is one absent to be bitterly blamed, and some one in fretful anguish cries out, and the others, heart-broken, try for excuses and find nothing to say!

This was how it was. The mother and daughter had talked it over till there seemed no more to add, but Sir John had not had this relief. All his pain and anger had been locked up in his own bosom, and now they burst forth. "What did he do it for? What did he suppose he could make by it?" Sir John did not believe that his son thought anything could be made by it; but how was he to repress the intolerable pang in his own heart for Arthur's loss and ruin? And yet he was angry that nobody defended Arthur when he stopped speaking. He was angry, also, when the women attempted to defend him. It did not much matter which it was. He was silent for a moment; and the dull sky outside, and the dull air with its double rain from the clouds and the trees, filled up the great windows with dreariness, adding another element of depression; and Lady Curtis gazed drearily into the fire, stooping over it to get a little warmth, and Lucy stood by the table motionless with tears upon her cheek. Then Sir John burst forth again:

"If there had been anything to justify it, you know! One has heard of a man losing his head for a great beauty, something out of the way—a siren, you know; but a village girl, and, from all I hear, a virago, a temper—"

"Don't let us speak of her," said Lady Curtis, with a movement of disgust. "It's enough that he has done it. Oh, the foolish, foolish boy! Separated himself entirely from his own sphere, and his natural life, and us!"

"Mamma," said Lucy, breathless, "I don't want to excuse Arthur; but what could you say worse of him, both papa and you, if he had done something *wrong?*"

They both turned upon her, furious: yet so thankful to her for standing up for him with whom both were wroth beyond words.

"Wrong!" they both cried in one bre
"Are you mad, child? Do you thi
not done wrong?"

"He has been very, very foolis
growing pale. "Yes, he is w
know he is wrong. But if he h
thing shameful, *wicked*, mother
have done so—sin—crime—you
it more seriously, you could
him."

"Sin!"
girl, yo
be sin

this. It is worse, ever so much worse, both for him and us, than what girls like you call sin."

"No, papa!" cried Lucy, with flashing eyes. "I will not hear you speak so of Arthur. He has been disobedient to you; but he is a man. God does not mean us always to be obedient like little children. And he has done nothing that is wrong. I will not hear any one say so!"

"Wrong!" cried Lady Curtis, rising in her indignation and pain. "Do you call it right to bring misery and disgrace into a family; to break off all his old ties for a new one; to throw off father and mother, and duty and honor, for the sake of a fancy, for the sake of a pretty face? What does he know more of her than a pretty face? Love! is that what can be called love?—for the sake of his own will and self-indulgence, the unkind, selfish boy!"

And then she sat down again and cried bitterly, which was a relief to her. Sir John could not cry, but he got angry, which was a relief to him.

"Let me never hear you excuse him again," he cried, "or you will make me fear that you are not to be trusted either. What, Lucy! you think children are not to be expected to obey their parents—you, a girl! Then, God help us! What have we to expect, your mother and I?—our only boy lost to us in a disgraceful connection, and our only girl ready to follow his example."

"Papa!" cried Lucy, indignant, yet trembling.

"Is that the prospect before us? It is kind of you to give us warning; and to take such a moment for doing it, when we are crushed sufficiently, I should think." Then he changed from this pathetic, sarcastic tone, and turned upon her with fierce and threatening looks. "But mind you, Lucy, I'll shut you up, as fathers had a right to do once. I'll keep you on bread-and-water—by Heaven, I will—before you disgrace yourself like Arthur, right or wrong!"

"Hush, hush!" cried Lady Curtis, roused. "Oh, John, you forget yourself! Lucy, Lucy, your papa does not mean it. We don't distrust you. Fancy distrusting Lucy, our Lucy, John! Oh, we are not come to that!" and she went to her daughter, and kissed her, and held her close in her arms.

Lucy had not said a word, but she had raised her head as her father vituperated, and fixed her eyes upon him steadily. She was not a girl to be frightened; but her mother grew frightened looking at her, and seeing the pale indignation and firmness in her face.

"Of course, I never meant that," said Sir John, fretfully, sitting down in his chair with an angry *thud* which seemed but an echo of his sigh. "Why do you put your fantastic meanings into a man's plain words? Hadn't you better go and get your things off, and make yourselves comfortable? And you can send me a cup of tea. It is all this wretched, depressing day!"

CHAPTER XIV.

The rector came up next morning to see his aunt and his cousin, and hear their story. Nothing for a long time had interested him so much; and though he was very sorry for Arthur, and sorry for those who had so much to suffer on Arthur's account, there was a latent feeling in Hubert Curtis's mind that some advantage, more or less, though he could not exactly tell what, was likely to come to himself from Arthur's misconduct. He did not wish to profit by his cousin's loss, but the impression was strong on his mind that this was likely to be the case, whether he wished it or not, and, naturally, it moved him to a certain excitement.

Hubert Curtis was not specially adapted to be a clergyman; in fact, it might, perhaps, be said that, of all professions for which he was unadapted, the Church was the chief. It had not been thought of for him till he was eighteen, just leaving Eton, and with thoughts of a crack regiment and all the pleasure of life in his mind. By that time Arthur was fifteen, and it had become quite apparent that there was no likelihood of a second son at the Hall to hold the living of Oakley, as was the tradition in the family; and Sir John's uncle, who was the then incumbent, was old and growing infirm. This being the case, there was a hurried consultation on the subject in the family; in consequence of which General Curtis paid a short visit to his brother at Oakley. It was because of that uncle, who was still a young man, in possession of Oakley Rectory, when Anthony Curtis, Sir John's younger brother, grew up, that he himself had been made a soldier instead of a clergyman. He was now a general in the Indian Army, with a tolerable fortune, and sons enough to re-enforce all the professions. Hubert was his second boy: he was a lively fellow, full of fun, as his family said, and in those days rather apt to get into scrapes—the very boy for the army.

And when the general came home and announced the result of the family conclave, which was that Hubert, instead of putting on a red coat, was to go to the University and study for the Church, there was much tribulation in the old house at Kensington, where the general lived with all his children. The sisters wept with Bertie, who was in despair, and Mrs. Curtis went about the house with a mournful countenance, saying to everybody, "It is so much for his interest—it is a thousand a year."

After a while, it is true, this consideration healed and bound up even the broken heart of Bertie. A man does not come easily into possession of a thousand a year as a soldier, and it was not pretended that he was clever to push his way to the front of his profession; whereas here his income would be certain and immediate, and nothing would depend on his cleverness. The parish was small; there was a capital house, very good society, good shooting, fishing, everything a man could desire; and as for the duty, there was not very much of that, and by means of a curate it would always be possible to diminish what little there was.

Thus matters were smoothed down, and Bertie went to the University; and in due time, on his uncle's death, became the Rector of Oakley, like all his grand-uncles before him. He was so far conscientious that he did not keep a curate, the parish being one which contained about two hundred of a population only—that is, he did not keep a permanent curate, though he indulged freely in occasional aid.

But it may be supposed that in these circumstances Bertie Curtis was not, perhaps, so adapted for his work, or so devoted to it as most of the other clergymen of whom we are so proud in England. He liked his ease, which they are not supposed to do, and that liberty of going where he liked, and doing what he liked, which only the richer members of his profession can indulge in. He went to all the races all over the country, and betted a good deal in a quiet way; but, to be sure, the village people did not know where he was when he was absent from home, and he might just as well have been at a meeting of the Church Union as at the Doncaster meeting.

And Sir John and the other magnates did not care. Some of them said Bertie Curtis was thrown away where he was, such a good fellow! He "got on" just as well as if he had been the most devoted parish priest under the sun. In externals he was good-looking enough, with the good features and high nose which belonged to the family; of good height, rather over than under middle size, but not tall; well-made, well-dressed, active, and not stupid—on the whole, an attractive, agreeable squire-parson, quite benevolent enough, and not disposed to be uncivil or disagreeable to any man. Poachers he hated by nature, Dissenters he disliked professionally, though he was too much of a gentleman even to notice them; but otherwise he was friendly enough to everybody who did not interfere with him.

This was the man who came up to the Hall, concerned and interested, to inquire about Arthur; feeling very sorry for Arthur, yet with an indistinct but not unpleasant unconsciousness that one way or another Arthur's mistake and failure in life must be good for himself. There was one little weakness which Hubert had—an inclination towards his cousin Lucy, who did not at all incline towards him. Up to the present moment it cannot be said to have gone the length of love, but he felt that it would be in every respect very suitable if Lucy and he could "hit it off together." Sir John would like to have his daughter settled so near him, and Lucy's fortune would be a very comfortable addition to Bertie's thousand a year; and then he liked her better than any of the girls about, better than all the young ladies whom, he modestly felt, he might have for the asking.

There are, indeed, it must be avowed, a great many young ladies in the world to whom a thousand a year is as attractive as it proved to Bertie Curtis, and who, being unable to get it as Bertie Curtis did, have to "go in for" the clergyman, instead of going in legitimately for the living, as it is the man's proud privilege to do.

But none of these aspirants pleased him as Lucy did, who was not an aspirant at all. In this the contradictoriness of human nature showed itself. He liked Lucy, but Lucy did not care for him. She did not go so far as to dislike her cousin, but she perceived, as girls of fantastic notions have a way of doing, that Bertie's aims were not very high; and he was not old enough to be looked up to, and to have his faults condoned, like the kind old uncle whose place he occupied, who was not an ideal parish priest any more than Bertie, but whom Lucy would not permit any one to criticise.

When the rector was seen coming up the avenue next morning, neither Lady Curtis nor Lucy was delighted by the sight. "He is coming to ask after Arthur—that pink of propriety, who never did anything imprudent or compromised himself for other people," said Lady Curtis; which perhaps was not quite just; for Hubert had "compromised himself," if that was any credit to him, often enough when he was at the University, before it became his profession to be good.

But there are many mothers and sisters who will understand Lady Curtis's feelings. To be sympathized with, when your scapegrace is out of favor, by some respectable contemporary who never was in anybody's black books in all his virtuous life, is not that more than feminine flesh and blood can bear? Does not one hate the virtuous youth who has always so wisely shunned the broad path and the green? And Bertie was especially obnoxious to this hatred—Bertie, who frequented all the race-courses in a black tie, and had a book on every great "event," and yet was always so decorous, keeping within the bounds of clergymanly correctness, though he never professed to be devoted to his profession. Had he been an open humbug and hypocrite, he would have offended these ladies less. They knew how sympathetic he would be about Arthur, how he would "understand his feelings," and yet show in his faultless, manly demeanor how weak it was of Arthur to throw himself away.

Lucy's first impulse had been to leave the room when she saw Bertie appearing, but she was convinced of the futility of this when Lady Curtis sprung to her feet impatiently. "There is Bertie!" she cried. "Lucy, you always get on with Bertie; I really cannot put up with him to-day."

"But you would not leave me alone—not alone—to entertain Bertie to-day."

"My dear, what does it matter? He is your cousin," said Lady Curtis; and then she changed her mind and took her seat again. "Of course he is sure to speak to me about it some time or other—as well to-day as any day," she said; "but oh, Lucy, to see him sitting there so correct and proper, and my Arthur—" cried the vexed mother.

"Arthur has done nothing wicked," said Lucy, elevating her head, with again that look of resolution in her eyes. Lady Curtis did not understand this look. She was afraid of it. She asked herself, could Lucy have anything on her mind? Lucy would not and could not emulate Arthur. No chance that she would distress her parents with a lover of low degree, or any man who was not a gentleman. But then if Lucy "took anything into her head," that would be worse than anything Arthur could do. A [illegible] bling came over Lady Curtis. It [illegible] enough to lose her son, but Lucy everything she had in the world. thoughts were passing through her was shown into the room. The clerical tricks which he had learn did not assume a clerical deportme He would take the hand of it with silent m thy; and if asperated of his co meaning

This, however, was got over, and so was the close pressure of the hand which seemed to say so much, and Bertie sat down. The ladies were in a small morning-room which they were fond of, which opened out upon the green terrace in summer; and there they lived half out-of-doors in a kind of stony bower formed by two of the pillars which adorned the front of the house. The windows were very long and straight, the room was furnished luxuriously, in a taste which is scarcely approved by the art-standards of the present day. But they liked it for very different reasons: Lady Curtis because she had herself furnished it, arranged every festoon of the drapery, and chosen every scrap of the Louis Quinze furniture; and Lucy because she had always known it like this, and could not bear any change. Lady Curtis sat with her back to the light, that at least Bertie might not see the effect of his condolences. His face was so serious, so sympathetic, so full of feeling, that few people could have withstood it. He did not say much as he pressed their hands, and after he sat down there was a pause. Lady Curtis had grasped at her work when he appeared. It is a great safeguard to a woman to have a piece of work which she can bend her head over, and thus avoid the inspection of such serious eyes. "I heard you had got home yesterday," he said; "I am sure my uncle will mend, now that you are here."

"Was papa ill," said Lucy, "while we were away?"

"Ill is not the word, perhaps: but one could not help seeing that he was very unhappy. He will be better now. I came up to the Hall to see if I could be of any use in amusing him a little, but it was not me he wanted. And how is Arthur? I hope you saw him before—"

"Yes, thanks, I saw him," said Lucy; "he is very well. There has never been anything the matter with him that I know of."

"No, not with his health, of course; and I hope, aunt, you were more satisfied about—the lady—than we hoped, or, I should say, feared—"

"If you mean Mrs. Arthur," said Lady Curtis, forcing herself to speak the words steadily, "I did not see her, Bertie. I did not wish to see her; therefore I cannot give you any opinion on the subject."

"Nay," he said, gently, "I did not want any opinion. I only trusted that you had been—pleased, or, at least, less displeased—than we fancied. I suppose they have gone abroad?"

"I suppose so," said Lucy, rather drearily. This cross-questioning was insupportable to her also; but she was not of an impatient temper like her mother; accordingly, while Lady Curtis fumed, it was Lucy who had to speak.

"That will be a good thing," said the Reverend Bertie; "so much can be done abroad. It is really the place to go to when a little polish is wanted. The very fact of living among foreigners is good for one in the way of culture, and Arthur himself has such good manners. I hope you will not think it an impertinent question—but I hope, my dear aunt, there is no open breach?"

"What do you mean by an open breach?" she said, indignantly. "You talk as if Arthur had murdered some one. If you will tell me plainly what you want to know, I will endeavor to give all the necessary information."

"My dear aunt, is it not natural I should like to know? Arthur and I have always been good friends. In happier circumstances, I should have married him, or helped to have married him—surely you don't think it is mere vulgar curiosity. I don't conceal that I should like to know."

Lady Curtis threw her work aside. She could not keep up the appearance of calm. "I am sure you mean very well, Bertie," she said (though indeed she was by no means so very sure); "and perhaps I am not so patient as I ought to be. I can't talk my boy over as if he were a stranger. Arthur has been very foolish—"

"You think I don't understand," said the rector; "do you think I am so unfeeling? I know how hard it must be, and Sir John is very severe. But, after all, what is done cannot be undone. Things of this kind so often turn out better than any one expected. This is why I wanted to know if you had seen the lady. If she has sense, it may all come right, indeed it may—women are so quick, they pick up things so fast. I wish you would let me persuade you to take a little comfort. Things may not be nearly so bad as they seem."

All this was so well said that even the suspicious mother could not make any objections. After all, the chief thing against him was that *he* was not under a cloud, that he had not made an imprudent marriage; and it was hard to refuse his kindness, and treat him as an enemy on that account. Lady Curtis, who was changeable by right of her quick temper and feelings, melted all at once, and opened her mind to him—her mind, at least, if not her heart.

"If she had been a girl with any feeling, how could she have married so?" she cried. "Not one friend with him—his father and mother holding aloof. No, Bertie, it is very good of you to say so, but I have not any hope. Our boy is lost to us. Of course, when we are out of the way, he will come and take his place here, and she will take my place, which is no pleasant thing to think of; but in the mean time we have lost our boy."

"Indeed, you must not think so," said the rector. "When the first infatuation is over, Arthur will come back. He will not be happy in so different a sphere. He will miss you—he will miss Lucy—and all his old ways. In—how long shall I say? in a month, six weeks—he will come back and beg your pardon."

"I hope he will not have so little perception," said Lady Curtis, the color rising in her face. "You speak as if it were a case in which such a conclusion was possible; and no doubt there are such cases; but this girl—this girl is— Don't ask me—how can I tell you all the impossibilities of it? I see them, and I know that Arthur is lost to us. As his poor father says, 'He might as well be dead!'"

Lucy had not said anything, but Lady Curtis saw without looking that her daughter was not on her side. Lucy's head was very erect—her mouth was closed firmly, as if she was holding herself in; there was a certain resistance in the poise of that head, and displeasure in the mouth. Lady Curtis stopped short after she had answer-

ed her nephew, and, turning suddenly round to her daughter, burst forth: "Say what you mean, Lucy—say what you mean! I would rather have anything said to me than see you keep it in and despise what your mother says."

"How could I despise what you say, mamma," said Lucy, "or what you think, either? But I should like Bertie to know that I cannot blame Arthur as other people do. He is dreadfully wrong in some things; but we can't tell he is wrong at all in the great thing. Mamma, I cannot help it—I don't want to vex you. For anything we know, she may be the one wife in the world for Arthur; and when he was promised to her, pledged to her, and had got her love, and given her his—I should have hated my brother if he had forsaken her. Yes, I know you will be angry—but I can't help it. I might have been glad, in a way—it might have been better for the family; but I should have hated and despised him. He could never have been Arthur to me any more—that, indeed, would have been as bad as dying!" said Lucy, emphatically, with fire in her eyes.

Lady Curtis was so moved with displeasure that she could scarcely find words to reply. "You, Lucy! you to go and put yourself on the side of such a creature!"

"I don't put myself on her side, but Arthur has done nothing irremediable—I cannot, I cannot allow it to be said! Oh, foolish, foolish! unwise, unkind, ill-judged, whatever you please," she said, "but he has done nothing against his honor or against nature. He may repent it bitterly; but what he has done is not irremediable. I cannot have it said."

"All for love," said the rector, musing, with a half smile, "and the world well lost!"

"I do not mean anything nonsensical," said Lucy, blushing hotly with the shame of youth for being supposed capable of high-flown sentiment. "I am speaking of mere truth and honor. What is a man who is false to his word? who can be shaken off by other people's interference from the most solemn engagements a man can make? I had not thought of it when we left home. It seemed just like going to get Arthur out of any foolish scrape—as you did when he was saucy at Eton, and when he got into trouble about his work. But this is different: a man must keep his word."

"When he has made mad promises that will ruin him? when he is cheated into vows he does not mean? when he makes engagements that will be the torment and destruction of his life?"

"I—I—suppose so—when he has given his word," said Lucy, overwhelmed by her mother's vehemence, and by the sudden sense that even to this subject, which seemed so distinct, there was a second side.

CHAPTER XV.

"I HOPE you are not vexed by the interest I take in it," said the rector. "I fear my aunt is, though why, I cannot imagine; but, Lucy, I wish you would trust me, and tell me what you can. Who has a better right to be interested than I have? Not to say that I have been fond of Arthur all his life, and that he is one of my nearest relations—next thing to a brother, already."

There was something in the way in which he pronounced this "already" which roused Lucy, she did not quite know why. It seemed to convey an insinuation that there were still closer connections possible. She interrupted him hastily.

"I never knew that Arthur and you were such very good friends. Oh yes; cousins, of course. But cousin means almost anything, much or little, as people like."

"That is not a very kind speech," he said. "I always thought I had a certain right both to Arthur and you; but when you say this—"

"I do not mean anything unkind, but it is so. When people have been brought up together, it is different. Arthur's great friend," said Lucy, firmly, and with decision, though with a slight additional color, "who is like a brother to him, is Mr. Durant."

The rector smiled.

"You snub me very unmercifully," he said, "and I don't know why either. I suppose you mean that Arthur does not care for me. Well, of course, if it is so, one must put up with that. Durant? yes, Durant, I know, was his great ally; but since they have lost all their money, I thought Durant could not afford to keep up idle friendship; so, at least, it was said."

"He has been very kind to Arthur. I don't know if you call that an idle friendship."

"My dear cousin Lucy, I don't want to say a word that is disagreeable to you. If you think Durant a better friend for Arthur than I am—"

"I was not saying what I thought, or giving any opinion about best or better. I was only speaking of the fact."

"Well, so be it," he said, with a sigh; "but, at all events, you will not deny that there are few people to whom Arthur and his wife can be more important in the future. We are likely to live our lives out side by side."

"You mean after papa—"

"Now you are angry with me again! It may be years and years hence, and I hope it will; but in the course of nature—and my uncle would be the first to wish it—Arthur will succeed him. We are both a great deal younger than Sir John; and I suppose I am here for life—unless you are unkind to me, Lucy, and make me indifferent to everything," he said, lowering his voice.

She took no notice of this, unless by quickening her pace, and insensibly withdrawing a little farther from his side. They were walking down together to the village, where Lucy had her favorite old women to see, after her return home. She had no excuse for refusing her cousin's escort, and why should she refuse it? He was very nice; there was nothing in him that any lady could object to. He was her own near relative, and their way was the same as far as the village, and she liked him well enough. Why had everybody at the Hall this unexpressed, incipient distrust of Hubert Curtis? Lucy could not tell; and perhaps it was not necessary to have such a feeling to explain her little proud movement aside, her slight withdrawal when he spoke in this tone of subdued tenderness. She did not choose that her cousin should be tender to her, and therefore it was quite natural that she should withdraw.

"I suppose you are right," she said. "Of course, you are a great deal younger than papa; but it gives one a shock to think what may happen when he— I prefer, for my part, not to think of it. Yes," Lucy continued, with that sudden inconsistency which she had from her mother; "of course, Arthur and his wife will be of importance to you when we are all away from the Hall; and you have a right to hear all I can tell you. Well, Cousin Bertie—"

"May I not protest against this?" he said. "You are not kind to me, Lucy. What an air of selfish, interested, business-like curiosity you put upon the simple sentiment I expressed!"

At this Lucy blushed once more; for to be thought capable of imputing base motives, was not that as bad as to be base one's self?

"I beg your pardon," she said; "perhaps I am twisted a little—the wrong way. How can one help that, when everything has gone so contrary? Well, I will tell you all I know, and you must forgive me if I was disagreeable."

"You are never disagreeable," he said, in again that objectionable tone, and with a world of objectionable meaning, "to *me*."

Lucy veered a little farther off from him, as if she had been forced by the wind, but went on, taking no notice of the interruption.

"I saw her for a moment — yes, I thought you would be surprised. She is very handsome; and I was prejudiced — of course I was prejudiced. I thought, as women, I suppose, always do, that she looked bold, not as a girl should. I have no doubt," said Lucy, with a sigh, "that she thought the same of me."

"No one could think that of you."

"Oh, perhaps not that, but something equally disagreeable. She thought, most probably, that I was proud. She did not speak to me. I said I hoped she would be happy," said Lucy, dropping her voice, "and I hope I meant it, but I am not quite sure. Of course, I wish Arthur to be happy, and he cannot be happy unless his wife is. So that, at least, makes my wish quite sincere."

"And she did not speak to you! She did not think it an honor, the greatest honor that could have been done her—"

"Why should she think it an honor? It was her wedding-day. She was the first person to be thought of. And I did not mean to see her —at least, to speak to her. I did not mean that Arthur should find me out. Oh!" cried Lucy, with sudden compunction, "I retract all I said just now. When she came into the church, before she knew that I was there, she did not look bold. She looked beautiful—yes, beautiful! happy and serious, and not thinking who was there. Just, I should think, as a girl who is going to be married ought to look," said Lucy, with a soft mantling of color, less than a blush, impersonal, meaning the soft thrill of fellow-feeling, nothing more.

"But afterward — you thought her bold? Who is she? Did you see her people? Has she any people?" said Bertie: "that is almost as important as herself."

Lucy gave a slight shudder, which was not thrown away upon her companion. She had scarcely seen the rest of the Bateses at the time, but now the peculiarities of the other members of the group seemed to come back to her with the retrospective memory which excitement possesses. She could see them now — the shabby father upon whom that beautiful girl leaned, the mother in her Paisley shawl, and the flippant Sarah Jane. These were the "people" of her brother's wife. She made no reply, and her cousin went on.

"What a blessing that so much of the estate is entailed! Radicals may speak as they please about the law of entail, but how many old families would be kept up without? Fortunately, however angry my uncle might be, he has no power to punish Arthur; at least it cannot but be a moderate punishment. So long as he has Oakley—"

"He has not Oakley, Cousin Bertie. I wish you would not always talk of the time when papa will be gone. We may all be gone before him, for anything we know;" and once more she put out her two fingers under the folds of her warm jacket to avert the omen. The rector caught the movement and laughed.

"You are superstitious, Lucy. Why do you make that mystic sign at me?"

"I am not superstitious—it is to avert superstition," she said, quickly, with an idea that she was giving a reason. "But I don't like a conversation that is all occupied with what will happen when papa is—or that discusses my brother as if— You may think me fanciful, if you please, but I do not like it. I should not talk about Uncle Anthony's—to you."

She would not say the words "dead" and "dying," but left them to the imagination.

"You may say whatever you please to me," said the rector, softly, with a smile; and so far as concerned *his* father's death any one might have discussed it. General Curtis had not much to leave; it was not his end that would work any great change one way or other in the world. His sons would receive their pittance, and there would be no more about it. She might talk of it as long as she pleased, and the rector's feelings would not be much affected. But this was not the impression that Hubert Curtis wished to produce upon his cousin. He meant to say, *you* may say what you please—*you* are privileged; there is nothing that I would not accept from *you*.

But by this time they had reached the end of the avenue. The Rectory was the nearest house. It was a very handsome red-brick house, not older than the days of Queen Anne, standing only a little way off the road, half concealed in its shrubberies, well kept, graceful, and comfortable. The pediment of the front showed over the lower growth of trees, and was sheltered and embosomed in the loftier ones. A noble old cedar, stretching its long level arms across the road, stood close by the gate. All kinds of fine flowering shrubs were in clumps in front of the house —some shining in dark evergreen, and some rapidly dropping their many-colored leaves. There was something in the shape of sculpture adorning the pediment, and the Oakley tigers ramped on the posts of the gate; while behind stretched a large enclosure, full, apparently, of fine trees. It was as good as many a squire's house in the country; one of the very finest specimens extant of an English rectory.

At a distance of about a quarter of a mile lay the village—such a spruce and trim place as villages are which live in kindly neighborship with

a rich lord of the manor and a fastidious rector; their gardens, their windows, everything was in good order. There were flowers even now—chrysanthemums and dahlias, and some pale monthly roses. The end nearest the Hall and the Rectory was a sort of square built on three sides. The houses were old, with high-pitched roofs, covered with those soft brown-red tiles upon which lichens grow; and nothing could be more picturesque. A row of little old almshouses, older than either Rectory or Hall, was on one side; on the other was the Exchange, the Regent Street of Oakley. Here stood the inn, a rustic country inn, with a sign on a post in front of it; and the post-office, with Berlin-wool patterns in its little projecting window; and the shop in which you could buy everything.

It was so civilized a place that in the post-office there was a little circulating library, chiefly of novels; and scarcely less innocent was the inn parlor where two papers were taken, and where the village men dropped in, as into a club, to see if there was any news. The remains of an old cross stood in the centre of this little square. It was reduced to a mere stone post, with half-illegible carvings, and in more modern days somebody had built a drinking-fountain close to it, taking advantage of the old well which had been there from time immemorial. The drinking-fountain was shabby, as drinking-fountains have a way of being; but when horses stopped to drink out of the trough, and a few people came with jugs of an afternoon for the water, which was quite famous for making tea, with the broken old stone of the cross standing up into the blue skies beyond them, it was a pleasant sight enough. Everything, however, was gray with the November chill. Few people were out-of-doors, but the afternoon had begun to brighten through the haze, promising better weather.

"I am going to the almshouses," said Lucy, making a decided stop, in order to take leave of her companion.

"I will walk to the cross with you," he said. And as they came within reach of the village windows more than one good woman within, glad even of this mild incident to pass the afternoon, came and looked at them across the muslin blind, and decided that something would come o' that. "And I shouldn't wonder if it was soon," said the village dress-maker, getting up to look at the call of her assistant, "for one wedding brings another."

"Oh, is it true as it's nobody but a poor girl that young squire has married?" asked the assistant, under her breath, who was young too, and pretty, and remembered that the young squire had looked in at the window more than once as he had passed. "It might have been *me!*" she said to herself.

"There's that overskirt to finish, Miss Cording!" said the dress-maker, peremptorily. She prided herself in allowing no nonsense to be talked among her young ladies.

Lucy did not know of the eyes that were upon her, or of the guess in everybody's mind. She walked very sedately to the cross, and then turned round and bade her cousin good-bye.

"I have people to see in the almshouses, too," he said. "I will go on with you."

"I did not know you went there," said Lucy. She was better acquainted with the poor people than he was, and indeed did a curate's work, and saved (though without intending it) a great deal of trouble to the rector.

"You make me out to be worse than I am," he said, with an uneasy flush upon his face. "I may not perhaps take to the poor people as you do—I have not been brought up to it; but I am not such a stranger in the parish as you think."

"I did not think anything about it," said Lucy, calmly; and this perhaps he felt the hardest of all.

Sir John came strolling into his wife's sitting-room after these two young people had gone down the avenue. He was restless, and came in there three or four times a day, for no reason at all, except the restlessness of a troubled mind. He went up to the window, near which she was sitting, to get the light on her work, for Lady Curtis was not so young as she had once been, and her eyes, as she said, were going. She had not had courage to go out and face the damp air and the long dreary avenue with Lucy. She sat there mournfully enough by herself, trying to think she was interested in her crewels. Sir John did not say anything when he first came in, but went up to the window, and stared out with eyes that did not seem to see anything. But they did see something, for he said, after a moment,

"Is that Bertie that has gone down the avenue with Lucy? What does she want with him?"

"Nothing," said Lady Curtis. "She was going to the village, and he was returning to the Rectory."

"What does he want with her, then?" said Sir John. "You should not let her walk about the country with any stray man that may turn up."

"It is her cousin, John: surely she may walk down the avenue with her cousin, when they are both going the same way."

"Oh yes," he said; "surely she may; what harm can there be in it? Until you find out suddenly, perhaps, that another marriage has been concocted under your nose, and another of your children thrown herself away!"

"Have you seen any signs of it? Should you dislike it, John? I am so glad! I almost feared you were—favorable to him—thinking of something of the kind."

"I!" He went from the window to the fire, and propped himself up against the mantel-piece, with his back to it. From thence he talked slowly, perorating at his ease, and it was so pleasant to him to have an audience, and to have attention, that a sense of relief and comfort, not to speak of warmth, stole into his whole being. "I don't like parsons," he said; "I never trust them—you can't tell what they're after. It may be your money for charities, or it may be your daughter; and you never know which it is. And Bertie's so much worse than an ordinary parson that he doesn't even pretend to like his trade. He wasn't brought up to it, not young enough. So he has his own vices, to start with, and the parson vices plastered over them. I don't like your wolf in sheep's clothing."

"Perhaps we are hard upon him, John. Poor fellow, it was not his fault he was put into the Church; it is not his congenial sphere."

"He should have been on the turf," said Sir John. "If I had known the kind of fellow—

was, notwithstanding the traditions of the family, he shouldn't have had the living; and if we don't mind, he'll have our girl too."

"Oh no!" said Lady Curtis. "I was half afraid you *wished* for it, and was grieved for your disappointment."

"Disappointment!" he echoed again, and then after a pause he said, earnestly, "My lady, there must be no nonsense about Lucy. There must be no second *fiasco* of a marriage. You are not a duenna, and I don't want you to behave as if she was not to be trusted; but, after all, what is Lucy but a girl, like others? She must be taken care of; there must be no nonsense about her. If Arthur had behaved as he ought, it might have been different; but Arthur has been a fool, and there's an end of it, and that changes her position."

"John," said Lady Curtis, hastily, "you will do nothing without consideration? I am not defending Arthur, but you will not do anything without serious thought?"

"What do you suppose I can do?" he asked, with some bitterness. "Nothing, or next to nothing. Oh no, he will have everything his own way. But Lucy's position is changed all the same. She is, as it were, the only one we have. If it were not that celibacy never answers, I would tie her up not to marry, at least, in our lifetime."

"Oh, John!" cried Lady Curtis, in the extremity of her surprise.

"Well, why not? It would be a great deal pleasanter for you and me. I hate a girl marrying—losing her head, as they all do, and forgetting herself, for some poor creature of a man. Lord, if they knew just what the men are that they take for something above the common! I don't think I could bear to see my Lucy philandering and going on with a fellow probably not worth a word from her. But celibacy, I suppose, does not answer; at least, it is supposed not to answer, especially for women. A man may get on well enough."

"A great many women get on well enough; but you cannot wish it, John; surely you cannot wish it. Is it to secure a companion for us that you would have Lucy, poor child, give up her own life?"

"That is nonsense!" said Sir John. "Life is something more than marriage. That is the folly of women. Nothing makes up to them for this one thing. They have got it into their heads that love—love and marrying—is all life is good for. Fiddlesticks! Look at all the men in the clubs. They are chiefly unmarried men, and they lead a pleasant life enough. A married man, with all his cares, can't come up to them. They have a much jollier time of it than I have, for example."

"But Lucy—our Lucy! You would not like her to be like one of your old *roués* at the club!" cried Lady Curtis, half horrified, half laughing.

"They are not *roués;* that's another of your fancies. They are worthy old fellows, many of them with a great stake in the country. Now why, I say, mightn't a woman do just as well unmarried? There would be plenty for her to enjoy. If she hadn't her club, she would have society, as much as she could set her face to; and she could travel, if she liked that, as much as any man, and see life; and she could do no end of good, if that was her turn. Look at Miss Coutts."

"And this is the life you would choose for Lucy!" cried her mother. "Are you out of your senses, John? No kind husband for her, like what you have been to me; no children to climb about her—"

"Pshaw!" said Sir John. "As for the kind husband, that's one of your pretty speeches, my lady, and you may be laughing at me, for anything I know; and children—to treat her as Arthur has treated you and me! Did we ever refuse the fellow anything in reason? No, I don't say it would do; I only said I would tie her up if I could, if it had been practicable; and I believe it would have been a great blessing for all of us—for her, too, if she could have thought so; but, then, I don't suppose she would have thought so;" and, with a sigh, he walked away.

CHAPTER XVI.

ARTHUR CURTIS did not think of the letter which old Davies had given him till days after. It had been crushed up in the pocket of his coat, the sight of his sister, and all the contending emotions of the time having put it out of his head; and what could there be agreeable in such a communication at such a time? A final sermon to him upon his folly, a final admonition as to all the terrible consequences of his fault—he had, he thought, enough of these, and he had not cared to make himself miserable on his wedding-day with such a communication. It was not unmixed delight, even without that, though this was not a confession he made to himself, in words, at least. But the sight of his sister's writing half sickened him when he saw it eventually. To be told that the course you are pursuing is ruinous, when you are entirely delighted with that course, is bad enough; but to be told so when the first shock of doubt, the first sharp suspicion of a mistake, has come into your mind, is unendurable.

Arthur had not, it may be supposed, allowed to himself that this was already the state of affairs within a few days after his marriage. He was the "happiest of men;" the society of his bride was sweet to him, and her tenderness gave him an exquisite, indescribable, all-penetrating delight, notwithstanding everything. Is the sudden shock of that absolute identification of two different people, the one with the other, ever for the first moment a happiness unmingled? It was not, at least, to Arthur. And Nancy was not one of those compliant, sweet-tempered women who swamp their own habits and ways in those of their husbands. Arthur had known these habits intimately enough; but the changed relationship brought such an entire change of aspect as was astonishing to himself. Heretofore he had been able to admire as piquant, or to laugh at as amusing, the roughnesses or simplicities of a breeding so different from his own; but suddenly an entire difference had come upon his feelings.

Now that he was responsible for these peculiarities, they became alarming to him; he saw them with the eyes of other people, of his mother, his sister, of Durant even, who would wonder

and be horrified to see Arthur's wife so conducting herself. She was no longer Nancy Bates, the girl for whom he was willing to risk the world—but a part of himself, in whom his own character, his own very being, was involved. This made the strangest difference in everything. He had already felt it beginning for some time, but it was in full force from the moment which changed the tax-collector's daughter into his wife. Thus he had felt, not amused, but irritated, when she made her appearance in that salmon-colored "silk."

That Mrs. Bates's daughter should wear the one fine and glistening garment she possessed to do honor to her bridegroom, and to dazzle the eyes of all beholders on her wedding-day, would there not have been in this a certain appropriateness in the midst of the inappropriateness, a *sancta simplicitas* which would have charmed him? But it became all at once much more apparent to Arthur that his wife ought to know better than to set out on a journey in a pink silk gown; though when he tried by all manner of deceptive arguments to beguile her into the choice of a more suitable dress, representing that the dark-blue serge or dark-brown merino in the shops would be warmer, more easy and comfortable, less liable to be spoiled, and every other false yet true reason for preferring it that he could think of, Nancy remained unconvinced.

"You sha'n't make a dowdy of me, Arthur, I can tell you!" she said. "I didn't get married to go about the world in these poor sort of clothes, like a dress-maker's girl; and to France, where everybody dresses so well!"

This was during the two or three days they stayed in London on purpose, if the truth had been told, to get a suitable outfit for her; but only Arthur, not Nancy, was aware of this true motive for the delay.

"My dear girl, if they dress well it is by having suitable dresses for everything, not by being fine," said Arthur, driven to his wits' end.

"Fine! You mean that I am dressed up!" cried Nancy, her color rising, "and that is hard, for it was all done to please you; I thought you would like to see me fine. I never used to mind what clothes I wore; but I—and mamma too—tried to make as good a show as ever we could, for your sake."

What could Arthur do but protest that he loved her more, if that were possible, for the pains she had taken to please him, and thought the salmon-colored dress lovely? But after a while he returned to the charge. "In France," he said, with the air of an authority, "they are great on having a dress for every different occasion. Their dresses for the morning they never wear in the evening, and their travelling dresses—"

"But goodness me!" cried Nancy, "what an extravagant way of going on! It may be all very well for duchesses and grand ladies; but that would never do for a poor girl like me."

"You forget you are not a girl at all, much less a poor one," he said, pursuing his wiles, "but a married lady, my Nancy." Goodness me! is not a pretty oath; he swallowed it, however, not daring to attempt correction, with a secret grimace.

"Yes, that is all very well," she repeated, "but, all the same, we are poor enough. I sha'n't be a bit richer than I was. I may be grander, I don't know; for your folks have cast you off, Arthur: you mustn't forget that."

"Oh! my *folks!*" cried the unhappy one under his breath: the word hurt him, in spite of himself. He had not been so delicate once; but this was like a dig in the ribs to Arthur. It made him cry out, though he stifled the cry.

"No, I don't think much of what you say if that is French fashion," said Nancy. "English fashion is far better. Instead of fussing and changing all day long, and wasting one's time, it is so convenient just to pin in a bit of lace and double back the fronts, and there you have a lovely dress for the evening; that's what I like. No need to go and unpack one's boxes, and get out another dress; it's done in a moment. You must allow, Arthur, that English fashion is best for that."

Poor Arthur! He thought of his sister's little simple toilets, so fresh, so crisp, so plain! and he did not know—what foolish young man ever does know? that whereas the finery is an easy matter, these dainty sobrieties of garb are the highest quintessence of art. In novels, which are the chief exponents of young women to young men, and of young men to young women, has not the captivating humble bride always a spotless collar and cuffs ready for every emergency, which make her exquisite on all occasions? Why had not Nancy the secret of that little collar and snowy cuff?

All this, however, is a digression from the letter which he found in his pocket, having thrust it away there on his wedding morning. He tore it open impatiently after this talk. Did not he know very well what must be in it? But it was better to glance at it and be done with it at once. He found it, however, something so very unlike what he supposed that the little letter completely unmanned him and took his strength away. He read it first with so much surprise that he could scarcely comprehend its meaning, and when he had fully mastered it, burst out into an abrupt break of sound of the most unintelligible description.

"What is the matter?" cried Nancy; she was half frightened. She came to the door of the inner room in which she was, and looked out upon him, half dressed, wrapped in the shawl Matilda had lent her. "Are you laughing or crying?" Perhaps it had been a little of both; but, at all events, it had left the tears in his eyes.

"Look here," he said, with an unsteady voice, "this is the letter old Davies gave me on Tuesday;" and then he added, in a lower tone, "God forgive me! I don't deserve it," with a half-sob.

Very coldly Nancy took the letter. She knew by instinct what it must be. It was written in a rather illegible but pretty handwriting, not at all like, but somehow superior, she felt, to the pointed precision of her own.

"I am going to your wedding to-morrow, Arthur dear; not to see you, but to be there, that there may be some one that loves you all the same. That always goes without saying. We think that you may not have money enough to do all you want, so we have just been to the bank to get this. Dear, dear Arthur, God bless you! Mamma shakes her head, but she says it all the same. LUCY."

And then there was added, in another hand,

"Surely I say it, surely I must say it always. And God forgive you, oh, my cruel boy."

Nancy puzzled over this for some time. She began to read it aloud, and read it wrong, so that it took a ridiculous sound; then laughed: while Arthur made a furious step towards her to seize it out of her hand. She grew serious then, which quickened her wits and made her finish her reading in silence. When she had done so, she flung it to him, letting the two notes enclosed flutter to the ground, and, without a word, turned round and shut the door violently in his face. He caught the letter; but the two fifty-pound notes lay between him and the door, crumpled by Nancy's angry fingers. He stood petrified for the moment, too much surprised to be either hurt or angry. Was this the way in which his wife received his first appeal to her sympathy? the first mention of those who, Arthur suddenly remembered, were, next to herself, the dearest to him in the world? Somehow he had forgotten this until now; but it suddenly gleamed upon him, a kind of revelation. Certainly it was so; his mother and sister, were they not his dearest friends, the most generous and kind? Was it possible that his wife could read this letter and not be touched? And yet she had tossed it at him, had crumpled up the notes like waste-paper. Was this the attitude she meant to adopt towards his family? And he had been so tolerant of hers!

Nancy did not say a word on the subject when they met again. She looked as if she had been crying, but said nothing, plunging into some indifferent subject with unusual interest. But it was not reasonable that the husband of three days could bear the matter like this. He said something about "my sister's letter," as soon as he had a chance. "We shall have a little more money to spend now, thanks to my mother's thoughtfulness," he said.

"Oh, your mother!" She flung away from him, flushing crimson—a color that meant anger, as he already knew.

"Yes, my mother," he said; "why should not I speak of my mother? I never think it strange, Nancy, that you should think of yours."

"Mine!" she cried, turning back upon him with flashing eyes; "her thoughts have been as much for you as for me. She has been as kind to you as to me" (this set Arthur thinking; but what could he answer to it?); "but there is not a word of me in all that letter, not a word, though they knew I should be your wife when you got it."

"What could they say? They did not know you, darling, and I had been silly. I had not written to conciliate, as I ought to have done, but to defy them. What could they say?"

"Say! It is just as good as if they had said, 'She is no more to us than the dirt under our feet.' They could not do anything against me or say anything against me, so they treat me as if I was not worthy to be noticed. Oh, that is what they mean! They think if they keep that up they will bring you back to them again, and persuade you that I am not worth thinking of. Oh, I know women's ways!"

"You are mistaken, Nancy; I am sure you are entirely mistaken."

"A great deal you can tell! They will not show you what they are after. They will smooth you down, and keep you not suspicious. Oh! I tell you I know women's ways."

"You don't know my mother and Lucy," he said, making an effort to stand against her; "they are not like the women you—"

"Not like the women I know? I knew you would come to that!" she said, violently. "Oh, I knew it the very moment I set eyes upon her; but not yet, not so soon as this." And Nancy, really wounded, in her blaze of unnecessary wrath burst into fiery tears. They were tears that might have been red-hot, and scalded as they poured down in a very thunder-shower. He had never seen such a torrent, and he stood thunderstruck; not melted as he had been before, when Nancy was moved in this way. Here, too, was a change. He stood still, he did not rush to her, and use all the blandishments he could think of to put a stop to the intolerable spectacle of her distress. He let her cry. He was confounded by the sudden outburst; and a sharp twinge of shame for her mingled with the pain she gave him. He was ashamed that *his wife* should be so unjust, so hasty in her judgment, so violent in her mistaken ideas. When he did go to her, it was slowly, with a hesitation very different from the lover's rush. That she should be so foolish *now*, was not that something derogatory to him?

"Nancy," he said, "I cannot think how you can be so—unkind. Do you think I mean any offence to you, or that *they* mean any offence? Of course you know they wanted me to marry some one—better off; some one they knew."

"Oh, let me go!" she cried, choking with pain and rage together. "I will go back to my mother; and you can go to yours, of whom you think so much. What does it matter about a common girl like me?"

"I think you are trying to drive me mad," he said. "Have I ever wavered between you and my mother? But I see now where I did wrong; I should have gone to her and made a friend of her, instead of defying her. I should have taken you to her—"

"Taken me!"—she jumped up and faced him, trembling with agitation and fury—"taken *me!* Am *I* to be dragged about to people that don't want me, to people that dare to despise me?"

"Nancy!"

"Nancy! that's all you can call me now. I used to be your love and your darling; now we're married, and I'm bound and can't get free, and you call me Nancy! Oh, if it was all to do again, and I knew what I know now!"

"What on earth do you know now that you did not know a week ago?" he cried, with an impatience beyond words; and yet he felt half inclined to laugh. That the impassioned creature who stood defying him, blazing in impulsive wrath, should resent the absence of those loves and darlings and tender words with which he had hitherto caressed her ears, so hotly as to desire to break every bond between them, struck him with a sudden sense of the absurdity of their quarrel. He went suddenly up to her and took her into his arms. "But you *are* my darling," he said, "all the same; though you are the most unreasonable, the most quick-tempered, the most provoking. Sweet! what is everybody in the world to me compared with you?"

Thus the first quarrel terminated, though not without considerably more trouble. Nancy perhaps saw too the foolishness of this impossible struggle, and yielded after a certain amount of flattery, coaxing, and caresses. And the cloud blew over so completely that, much to his surprise, he found himself able to persuade this despairing bride next morning to get the travelling dress he wished her to have, and to tone herself down generally, and make herself warm and comfortable and less fine. They crossed the Channel two days after, more lovers than ever; but no longer publishing their recent nuptials in their appearance, with Nancy's "silk" carefully packed at the bottom of her box, and herself in a dark-blue gown and little plumed hat, looking more like Mrs. Arthur Curtis than Nancy Bates had ever done before.

Arthur's heart beat high with pride and pleasure as they watched the white cliffs disappearing. Nancy not without a little natural sentiment, for she had never been out of England before, and it seemed a great thing to her to be out of her own country, and on the verge of a "foreign land." But fortunately the passage was a very good one, so that no less elevated feeling mingled with these tender regrets. He had her in his own hands now, the bridegroom said to himself; all her antecedents left behind, the home and relations happily got rid of, and all the influences of her new life around her to wean her from the past. And how tractable she had shown herself already, how willing to be convinced! a tender creature, who accepted his dictation sweetly two minutes after she had burst forth in rebellion against him; who had been indignant at his sister's letter (and it was, Arthur allowed to himself, nasty of Lucy—rather like a spiteful girl, after all, as Nancy said—not to mention her in that little note which was intended to be so gentle and peace-making), and then had forgiven it so frankly as to use part of the money that Lucy sent.

This unreasonable, inconsistent, foolish, generous, hot-headed, soft-hearted darling, could any man desire better than to have her wholly to himself to guide her wayward feet into the print of wifely, womanly ways? The mean little house, the poor form of existence at Underhayes (ungrateful young man! it had seemed an idyllic life, full of noble simplicity and poetry, when he knew her first), lay far behind; and while the probation lasted it would seem so natural that England itself should fade out of sight, and all that was past be forgotten, until by-and-by he should take his bride home a lady in every outward sign, as she was, he assured himself, in heart. It is so easy in a young man's glowing fancy to work this change. Likewise, it is very quickly done in many novels, and with wonderful facility and completeness; and, as has been said, where but from novels was Arthur to have acquired any experience in the treatment of cases like his own?

All went well during that journey. It was a beautiful day of the early winter; warmly soft as November can sometimes be, by way of contrast to its ordinary miseries, the sea and the sky alike blue; and if the wind was cold, what there was of it, the sun shining so warmly as to neutralize the wind. And Nancy now at least was well defended, and need fear no chill. Her cheeks glowed with the fresh breeze, her little outcries, half of alarm, half of exhilaration, when the steamboat gave a small pitch which hurt nobody, delighted Arthur. She clung to him, and steadied herself by him with both hands clasped on his arm, and had no thought, now that her moment of sentiment was over, of anything but the excitement of this novel world into which she was hastening. All the clouds that had been upon their horizon seemed to float away.

"I have been thinking," she said, when they got into the railway-carriage on the other side, and Nancy had got over her first amused wonder and bewilderment, "to hear everybody talking and not to understand a word." They had a carriage to themselves, though that is not so easy to manage on the other side, and Arthur, delighted with his task, had begun to teach her little phrases in the tongue which, notwithstanding her much-talked-of previous studies, was quite an unknown tongue to Nancy. "I have been thinking—"

"What is it? Something very grave indeed, judging from that serious face."

"Yes; something very important. I have always wished it, but they would never give in to me. Not that mamma did not think me quite right, but it is very difficult to break a habit in a family. But you must do it, Arthur; it is not such a very old habit with you."

"What is this great thing I am to do—give up smoking—take off my mustache?"

"Oh no!" cried Nancy, horrified. "The nicest thing about you!" which pleased Arthur much, for it was still new enough to give him unfeigned and honest pride. "But I will tell you what it is. Nancy is so vulgar, so common, not a name for a lady; and it will not sound well here, abroad, where people have such pretty names. Call me Anna—I have always wished it. I was christened Anna Frances, you know."

"And I could not think who she was when they married me to her," cried Arthur. "I will call you what you like, my darling; but I like Nancy best."

Did ever young people start on a honey-moon expedition with a better understanding? He planned a hundred places to take her to, and things to do. The theatre every night—how Nancy's eyes sparkled! and the Louvre, of which she was quite willing to admit that it must be very fine, without knowing what it was; and the Tuileries gardens with the band playing, and the beautiful shops in the Boulevards. Even to hear of these delights was enough to charm any bride. They were to go everywhere, to see everything, to walk about and drive about always these two together—nobody to interfere with them; and the play every night! What could any bride desire more?

CHAPTER XVII.

Paris, with all its lamps and shop-windows, dazzled Nancy. It was before the days in which ruins were visible from that brilliant Rue de Rivoli, through which they drove to their hotel. She thought it was an illumination as she saw the sweeping circles of light in the Place de la Concorde, and the long line of lamps w

ways, and could not be persuaded that this was how the brightest of cities adorned herself every night. And when she opened her eyes next morning to the brilliancy of the winter sunshine, and saw the brightness and gayety of everything around, Nancy was fairly transported out of herself.

She had never even been in a great hotel before, for Arthur had taken her to London lodgings he had been in the habit of using, in Jermyn Street, which were not dazzling. But here everything was lovely, Nancy thought. They had a little *appartement* in one of the great hotels overlooking the garden of the Tuileries, with a little balcony; and from the white carpet with its bouquet, and the sparkling wood fire which was so bright and clean and supplemented the sunshine so delightfully, to the mirrors and gilding, and white panels of the walls, everything she looked upon filled Nancy with a bewildering, delicious sense of having arrived at the summit of fineness and splendor, and being a lady indeed, a princess almost, enshrined in a bower of bliss. Nothing she had ever seen in all her limited experience was half so splendid; and the noiseless waiters who ran up and down with every luxury that Arthur could think of, and the dainty food, and the perpetual service bewildered her unaccustomed brain.

This, then, was how great people lived! With carpets like velvet, sofas covered with satin; a host of eager servants to find out what they wanted, and bring them everything that could be thought of; mirrors to reflect them on every side (Nancy had never been so sure about the *sit* of her dress, or knew so well what her figure was like before—and it was a very pretty figure). No wonder they were happy!

When they had breakfasted, a pretty victoria, with a fur rug to cover their knees, came to the door, and in this they drove all about, taking what Arthur called a general view of Paris, its pretty streets, its river and quays, its boulevards, the Champs Élysées, brilliant in the sunshine, with the great arch at the end. When Arthur stopped to let her see Notre Dame, Nancy was respectful, but failed a little in interest. It chilled her to go into a church in the middle of a week day so soon after she was married. Church was for Sundays, she felt, not a place to go into in the midst of laughing and talk. She felt it like a *memento mori*, a sudden chill upon her exhilaration, and supposed that Arthur took her there with the intention of making her remember her duty and her "latter end," which was a suggestion she did not like.

"Now you shall see something quite different in the ecclesiastical way," he said, stopping at another church before they went back to their hotel; for he felt that somehow, though he did not quite know how, Notre Dame had not been successful with Nancy. But she altogether refused to go into the Madeleine.

"I don't know why you are so anxious that I should see the churches," she said, pouting. "I never knew you were so religious." Arthur made haste to disavow the imputation, as may be supposed, which all the same he did not like her to make. He was not "so religious," but he did not like to hear women speak of the matter so—it was "bad taste."

"It is because the building is supposed to be fine," he said, standing at the door of the little carriage to hand her out; but Nancy declined firmly. If she could not think of her duty without being taken into a lot of churches to be reminded of religion and of dying, and all that sort of thing, she did not feel at all disposed to be instructed so—and they came in from their drive a little silent, and not so delighted with each other, and with everything about them, as they had been when they went out, though Arthur, for his part, had not the slightest idea why.

Luncheon, however, obliterated all recollection of the churches, and made her again feel that everything was delightful in her present lot. Not that Nancy was *gourmande*, or given to dwell upon what she ate. One of those horrible luxuries, known in England as a Bath bun, would have contented her, so far as eatables went, quite as well as the daintiest little *fricandeau*. It was the accessories of the meal which told upon her—the obsequious attendants, the perpetual service, the silver dishes, the beautiful fruit on the table, and the sparkling wine, which she had heard the name of all her life as the crown of luxury, but had never tasted it even in its cheapest form. They must be spending heaps of money, Nancy felt, to live like this. But she was not bold enough to interfere just then, and there was an unexpressed and subtle flattery in Arthur's care to treat her as, she thought, only princesses, who were not brides, would be treated.

As a bride, Nancy knew she had a prescriptive right to everything that was fine. Even in her own knowledge, sacrifices were made to secure everything that was better than usual, for the brief but exquisite moment in which a girl held this official position. A bride had a right to a drive in a cab if she wished it—to a glass of wine if she liked it—to cakes and dainties, and a great deal of coaxing and admiration; and to wear her best dress when she went out, even though it should be on a week-day.

Arthur gave to his bride a glorified version of all these delights, except the last, the pretty victoria instead of a hansom, and this expedition to France and other unknown regions, instead of the day at the Crystal Palace, which Mr. Raisins would most likely suggest to Sarah Jane; though it was strange that he should object to her "silk," the only thing of which she had been perfectly sure that it was right. It was in this point of view that she liked the dainty luncheon; and when they went out again arm-in-arm in the afternoon for a walk, the shops on the boulevards threw her into an ecstasy. Arthur was complaisance itself to all her wishes here. He was willing to stand at the windows and look in as long as she pleased, and he took her here and there to glove-shops and milliners, and bought her a hundred pretty trifles.

In every shop they entered, both men and women were so eager to know what pleased *madame*, so anxious to prove triumphantly that this thing and the other was becoming to madame, so openly admiring, so caressingly urgent, that Nancy's head was turned. It seemed impossible not to believe in the sudden enthusiasm she called forth. Could it be only the ribbons, or collars, or gloves they bought that stimulated these delightful people into such warm and apparent admiration? No! Nancy could not entertain such an unworthy thought. It was their

kindness, she said to herself, and something still more agreeable whispered in her heart that it was her own attractions that made these people so kind. Had they not a real pleasure in seeing a young bride like herself, so fair, so happy, making everything look well that was put upon her? Nancy did not flatter herself in this open way, but she had a pleased and delightful conviction that this was the feeling in their minds. She believed in their sincerity, and that she had made a real impression upon them. Was not this how all the *nice* people in books, small and great, showed their appreciation of the lovely young heroine?

Nancy had not as yet any experience of the great: and indeed it was an effort on her part to keep up in her mind a certainty that she herself was in a superior position to the masters and mistresses, the "young ladies" and "young gentlemen" in these very fine shops; a little while ago she would have looked up to *them;* now this consciousness made her head turn round, and gave the most curious piquancy to their admiration and enthusiasm for madame.

"How funny it is," she said, as they came out into the crowded boulevard, where the lamps were beginning to be lighted, "to be called Madamm!"

Arthur looked a little strange at this pronunciation; but he did not venture to criticise. It was necessary to go very quietly with this touchy young woman. He told her some pretty things that monsieur in the shop had said to him while his wife had been fitting on her wares upon Nancy.

"If you make as much sensation at the theatre," he said, "what shall I do? I am nobody now. I am madame's attendant, her obsequious husband."

"Don't talk nonsense!" said Nancy, radiant. "What funny people the French are! Are they always paying compliments?"

"To people who have any right to them, yes; to pretty people, and those who pay well, and those who will be likely to believe them."

"Arthur, how unkind of you! I don't believe that people are so barefaced, saying things they do not mean. One must have a very bad opinion of other people if one thinks that."

But, for her own part, Nancy was not tempted to think so. She conceived a very high opinion of the French nation. If she could have got Arthur out of the way, she thought she would have liked to try a little conversation on her own account, for it would be delightful to be able to chatter as Arthur did, and talk to any one; but in his presence she did not like to venture. Once more they went back to their hotel in the most delightful state of content with each other and all the world. They were to dine early, and then go to the Français to see the "Bourgeois Gentilhomme." Arthur had told her the story of the play, and how she would be sure to like it, and that there was not a better French actor living, and not such a good English one; all which had impressed Nancy. And she was to be allowed to wear her pink dress, with a pretty wrap which he had bought, an Algerian mantle, softly white, with threads of gold, and a flower in her hair.

Nancy's heart beat with the thought of all this gayety and grandeur. He had bought her also a pretty fan; and they were to have a box, which was a thing which conveyed very magnificent ideas to her mind. To sit there throned like a young princess, and allow herself to be admired while the best of actors did his best to amuse her, in the midst of that which imagination had always painted to her as, after a ball, the most seductive of pleasures, a gayly lighted and brilliant theatre, what could be more delightful? And at first Nancy was quite as happy as she expected to be. When she looked out from the corner of the box with its silken curtains upon the bright, many-colored crowd, it seemed to her as if she could understand a little how the queen must feel when she came forward to thank her loyal subjects for their kind reception of her. Half of the people seemed to be looking up admiringly, wonderingly.

She had never felt so truly great before. How well she remembered, in the days of her humility, when the highest she could hope for was the upper boxes, watching beautiful ladies come into their box, and giving a careless, splendid look over the rustling company below before they sat down! And now it was she who was the beautiful lady in the box! Was there, perhaps, some poor girl somewhere, like Nancy Bates, looking at the lovely new-comer, surveying and envying her with a wistful gaze in all her finery, watching her look down upon the crowd, then sink gracefully into her chair as Nancy did, half retired behind the curtain? It seemed to her that she was two people, herself in the box—Mrs. Arthur Curtis—and Nancy Bates watching from her inferior place; and this doubled the enjoyment in the most wonderful way. How she would have noticed everything—the beautiful white mantle with its gold threads, the flower in the lady's hair, her dress, and everything about her, and with great, yet less absorbing interest, the handsome young husband who completed her belongings, and was so "devoted" to her! Nancy would scarcely have had eyes for the play in her admiration of the beautiful lady; and now she was the beautiful lady herself, in full possession of all the greatness a box at the play could bestow! How wonderful it was, and delightful! but yet, perhaps, not altogether so delightful and wonderful as it had seemed to Nancy in the pit.

But when the curtain rose, Nancy was not so sure that it was delightful. She was not sufficiently at her ease to enter into even the frank fun of the "Bourgeois Gentilhomme." She stared at M. Got with wondering curiosity and doubt. No doubt it must be very amusing, for everybody laughed, and so did Arthur; but Nancy could not laugh. What did that queer man on the stage mean by all those strange antics of his?—trying on his clothes in public, fencing with his maid-servant, making his mouth into round O's, when the still funnier man in the witch-like black hat directed him to do so. It was all strange to her. She puzzled over him, and could not make him out. "What is he saying?" she whispered to Arthur, when there was a wilder laugh than usual; but before she could understand what Arthur whispered back, laughing, there was another burst of amuse and she was thrown out again. A sation was only disappointme it became irritation. She c herself the only one who di

High up in the gallery above her, she could see a little French girl in a cap, who was enjoying it with all her heart. And Arthur, though he tried to explain all the jokes, forgot now and then, and gave himself up to the fun too, and never thought of her sitting there, who did not know what it meant, and could not possibly enjoy it. The doubtful smile which she kept on her face for the first scene or two gave way to a fixed and somewhat sullen stare. She fixed her eyes obstinately upon the stage, and gazed at the fun with unsympathizing face, blank and immovable. If M. Got had been her, she would have been like a beautiful nightmare to him; and, as a matter of fact, that inimitable actor played all his pranks before Nancy without conveying a single humorous idea to her mind, or one smile to her face.

How weary, how angry, how dull and miserable she grew, while the house rung with laughter, and all that fun went on under her eyes, now sore with staring! All this time the little French girl in the cab, up above—a poor little girl, not at all equal even to Nancy Bates—laughed till the tears came to her eyes; and Arthur laughed, untiring, too, though sometimes wondering a little why Nancy should be so quiet, and stealing anxious looks at her, which she would not respond to, but kept her eyes riveted on the stage. When the curtain fell, she gave a sigh of relief, but turned her back upon Arthur, and would not answer his questions as to how she had enjoyed it. Enjoyed it! How could he ask her, he who had done nothing but laugh, and never cared for her. When he rose, she rose too, but repulsed his attempts to wrap her cloak more closely round her.

"It will do very well as it is," she said, twitching it out of his hand.

"What is the matter?" he asked, wistfully, drawing her arm through his, not without a little resistance on her part.

"The matter? What should be the matter? I am only tired, and I shall be glad to get home," said Nancy.

"I have made you do too much. I have dragged you about and worn you out, my poor darling!" cried Arthur, and he was full of compunctions, half carrying her down-stairs. But when they got into the little *coupé* which waited for them, she burst forth.

"I can't see what there was so very amusing. I don't think it could be good French," cried Nancy. "I don't pretend that I can talk like you, but I learned French at school, and I am sure I could understand if it was good. You call that acting! I did not think he was clever at all."

"My love," said poor Arthur, "it was the great Got, the best comic actor in the world, I think. I never saw any one like him."

"I have seen a dozen better," cried Nancy. "What did he do? nothing but make a fool of himself, putting on those ridiculous clothes, and dancing and singing, and learning lessons, an old man! The great Go! I wished he would go, I am sure, long before he did go," she said, recovering her spirits a little by means of her pun. But the process was not so successful in respect to Arthur. He did not say anything, but shrugged his shoulders, which fortunately she did not perceive.

"I see," he said, at last. "That is not the kind of acting you care for; the higher walks perhaps would please you better. We will try something quite different to-morrow."

"Oh, to-morrow!" she said, with a little shiver. This delight of the play had already exploded for Nancy; and she recollected with dismay that they had agreed to go to a play *every night!* Was this how her life was to be spent? She thought regretfully of her mother and sisters sitting round the table, chatting about everything that had happened, and everything that was going to happen. The parlor was dingy, and she had thought of it with a wondering recoil of half disgust in comparison with her *appartement*, and all its coquetries, its white carpets and curtains; but she had never been so tired, so worn with trying to be happy, at home. The little wood fire, however, was burning brightly, and the wax-candles lighted, and the pretty sitting-room looked very comfortable when they got back to the hotel, which they began to call "home," with easy desecration of that word upon which the English pride themselves. Arthur put her into a comfortable chair, and made her take some wine, and petted and consoled her.

Poor Arthur! He was disappointed too, but he concealed it manfully. His character was developing in this unexpected probation; he was growing patient, forbearing, ready to make all sorts of compromises and sacrifices, to insure that his young wife should be happy. He had not been so good or so forbearing in his former relationships, when everything had been done to please him; but in marriage, if one will not be accommodating, why, the other must; there is no changing that necessity of nature. This union which had cost so much must not turn out a failure. If she would not exert herself, he must. Therefore he swallowed his disappointment in respect to the immediate evening, and in respect to the narrowing of future resources, which, if Nancy could not be made to like the theatre, would be very serious; and also the deeper disappointment, which he scarcely allowed himself to look at, of finding in Nancy less understanding than he thought. He sat over the fire a little when she had gone to bed and pondered it all.

After all, perhaps, it was not unnatural that a young girl who had no experience, and did not understand French, should not all at once appreciate Molière, even when interpreted by Got. Was it to be expected, was it likely? Arthur began to say to himself that his disappointment was the fault of his exaggerated expectations, and that he had been very foolish. Poor Nancy! what an ordeal he had subjected her to! But he would not be discouraged, he would try again. Something romantic and sensational at the Porte St. Martin, or a sentimental comedy, such as was running at the Gymnase, would do better. He would try that—something that would interest her. Arthur knew a good deal about the theatres, and he felt sure that one or the other would supply what was wanted. But there was a vague depression in his mind, notwithstanding the bright fire and the white carpets which were so warm and soft.

This first effort had not been a success. Nancy had not responded to his call; it was, he sup-

posed, his fault, but it was depressing. There was nothing injurious to Nancy in the comparison that suggested itself. He thought involuntarily of Lucy, how she would have laughed at Got's acting; how lightly she would have come in and sat with him over the fire, and talked it all over, and enjoyed it a second time. All that this proved was the advantages of education—it proved nothing more; and he did not want to change Nancy for Lucy, or to abandon the ventures of this strange and alarming double existence, which, having once begun for him, could never end except by death. The little failures, the continual perils of opposition and resistance, excited at least, if they did not delight, him. Life was no longer tame and monotonous, whatever else might be said.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Next day Arthur made a further experiment with his bride. It was one of the things he had promised her when they talked of Paris, and it had not occurred to him that the very name of the Louvre conveyed no idea to Nancy's mind. She had been quite willing to accept it as something vaguely splendid which she was to see, but that was all. He took her across the broad sunshiny courts with a little thrill of expectation, chiefly pleasurable, yet with a touch of doubt in it which perhaps made it more exciting.

Arthur was not himself very learned in art, nor an enthusiast about it. He knew what a young man of his breeding could scarcely escape knowing—he knew which were the pictures that everybody admires; he had all his life been accustomed to believe that he admired them; and what with association, what with faith, what with some natural sense of beauty, such as few minds are quite destitute of, he had liked to go and look at them from time to time when he was in the way of it, and had a certain acquaintance with the great galleries in all the places he had visited. He knew the Louvre well enough to know his way about, to be able to lead a neophyte from one great picture to another, and even to have his favorites in the Salon Carré.

This does not necessitate a very high appreciation of art, or much real acquaintance with its productions; but yet it was as the highest knowledge and the wildest furore in comparison with the absolute ignorance and indifference which exist in the class from which Nancy was taken. A less intelligent girl than Nancy, proceeding from the slightly elevated social position at which it has become known that pictures are things to be admired, and that admiration of them is a proof of superiority both in rank and intellect, would have known how to acquit herself in such an emergency. She would have gone through these galleries with a gush of indiscriminate delight, finding everything beautiful, or, at the worst, would have taken her cue from her husband, and admired what he admired.

But Nancy had not been educated even up to this point. She knew nothing about them, had never heard of Raffaelle or Murillo; and when Arthur said, "This is the famous Assumption," stared blankly, never having heard of it before; then turned her eyes up and down, gazing about her with that idea that one thing is as good as another, which is the very essence of ignorance. She had not even knowledge enough to be aware that it was becoming to feign an interest.

"What nice rooms to dance in! Are they all kept up for nothing but pictures?" she said, in deference to his apparent interest. Nancy did not say stupid pictures, as she had intended; and it is impossible to describe the disappointed feeling, the eager instructiveness of poor Arthur, who felt his own hitherto superficial conviction that every ordinarily well-endowed mind must care for pictures, at once confounded and intensified by the absolute blankness of his bride.

"My dear Nancy, France is more proud of these than of anything she possesses. It is one of the finest collections in the world."

"I suppose they are worth a great deal of money," she said, looking at them calmly, yet with a certain respect founded on this consideration. She was looking up at that divine wall upon which hangs the great Murillo, the Virgin of the Garden, and Her of the Veil, the sidelong penetrating fascination of the Gioconda, and many a wonder more; and her calm of incomprehension was almost sublime. Some were "pretty," she thought; but she pulled Arthur's arm a little to go on, not knowing why he should wish to stay so long, and keep looking when she had seen everything. To be sure, it was natural enough to respect things which were worth a great deal of money—the big vases, for instance, in the vestibules, of which she had felt that they must be worth a great deal, though they were not pretty. It was difficult to associate the same idea of value with the pictures, yet Nancy supposed nobody would make so much fuss about them but for this.

"Money!" Arthur said, with a little groan; then, making the best of it, as he was learning to do: "yes, dear, a great deal of money—and more than money. Any one of them, almost, is worth more, even in money, than all you and I have in the world."

"What a shame!" cried Nancy; "nasty old things!" and she pulled him on a little. Then she stopped for a second before the Leonardo in the corner, and laughed out. "What funny women! What are they sitting in each other's laps for? That is the funniest I have seen yet," she said.

"Hush, Nancy! this is by a very famous painter; but I cannot say I am fond of it," said Arthur, in his didactic vein. "That on the other side is his, too—the Gioconda it is called—I like it better."

"Not I," said Nancy; "isn't she *deep!* I can't bear people with that look in their eyes. She is exactly like Lizzie Brown at home in Underhayes—you remember Lizzie Brown, Arthur? Come on, I am sure we have stayed long enough here."

"As you like," he said, with a sigh; but there are some more I should have liked to point out to you—"

"That is pretty," said Nancy, pointing to a bright-colored copy which one of the many workers in the Salon Carré was making. "Mayn't one look what they are doing? They would paint at home if they didn't want to be seen. Oh,

they are *copying*, are they? I am sure that is a great deal prettier than the old thing on the wall. What do they copy for?"

"To sell chiefly," said Arthur, with a certain sullenness in his despair.

"Oh, to sell! I suppose people like to have them to hang in their rooms? How curious! I would much rather have a picture of you."

Now, Arthur had been falling into lower and lower depths of despondency up to this moment. He had said to himself that all his efforts were mere failures—that he could do nothing, and must give up the attempt; but now he cheered up quite unaccountably, quite unreasonably. There was nothing in what she had said to throw a new light upon Nancy's capacity and rehabilitate her in his eyes, yet somehow it did so. A sudden tender compunction for the harsh judgment he had been forming came into his mind, softening and melting him. He felt disposed to beg her pardon on his knees.

"You silly girl," he said, "what do you want with my picture? If it was of you, it might be worth something; but tell me, Nancy, if I were to buy you some of those copies, which would you choose?"

"I don't want one; you are buying too many things already. Well, perhaps *that*," said Nancy at random, pointing at the picture which French taste entitles La Belle Jardinière. It was a lucky guess enough.

"You shall have it, my darling," cried Arthur, delighted. "I knew you had real taste at the bottom of your heart."

"Oh no, not I," cried Nancy, shrugging her shoulders and dragging him on, "I don't care about it. It was only the first that caught my eye. Let us go on quickly through the other rooms; we have been such a long time here. You must not buy that thing: what should I do with it? I don't really care for pictures. To be sure, they make a room rather nice when they have nice frames; but we have not even a room to hang them in. But I will tell you what I should like to do," she continued, leading him out and in of the smaller rooms. "Let us go and get photographed, Arthur, *together*, in a nice large size. It will be a much nicer memorial of Paris. And then mamma would like it so much to hang up in the parlor and show to everybody. We must take her a present of some sort, and that would please ourselves too. She would like it a great deal better than that pink lady with the little boy."

"For Heaven's sake, don't describe the picture like that! Do you know it is a famous Raffaelle?" said Arthur, all the more horrified that some one had heard her young, confident voice and had turned round to admire.

"What is a famous Raffaelle? I don't pretend to know anything about it; and I'd much rather have a picture of you; but what would be really delightful would be to be photographed together. I wonder I never thought of it before. Let us go and find some one as soon as we get out of this stupid place. Oh yes, I have seen everything I want to see."

Poor Arthur! He was pleased that she should want a portrait of himself. This flattering touch mended his wounds a little, and as she hurried him out again into the bright wintry streets (breathing, herself, a sigh of relief when they got fairly clear of the galleries), he said to himself, with the new philosophy which had come to his aid, Well! how was it to be expected she should care for pictures, she who had never seen any?

Of course the anticipation was quite absurd on his part. Art demands a special education. To plunge an unsophisticated mind without any training, without any preface, straight into the profundities of Leonardo, of Raffaelle, of Perugino, was ever anything so unreasonable? and then to expect her to understand at once! The poor young fellow felt that he had been hard upon his Nancy, though, Heaven knows, without meaning it.

And, then, what a pretty idea that was of hers about the photograph! He had winced a little at the idea of having it hung up in Mrs. Bates's parlor, and exhibited to all her friends; but that was a paltry feeling: and what could be more natural and delightful than that she should wish for such a memento of their honey-moon? That she should be so eager about it, was not that a proof that she was happy, nothwithstanding all the little frets of her new position, and those ill-advised efforts of his to force her into his own conventional code of the right things to be admired? That was all a matter of education, he felt sure. He had not thought it to be so before. He had supposed, in his ignorance, that a fine picture was like a fine landscape, comprehensible to everybody; but then Arthur recollected what he had read somewhere, that it was very long even before people began to admire nature; that a generation or two back the Alps were only horrible snowy deserts, and mountains generally were looked upon as obstructions and eye-sores by the common mind. This showed clearly (he said to himself) that education was everything. It not only *trained* the eye, but might be said to create it, giving perceptions of beauty that actually had not existed before.

This thread of thought kept him occupied as he went on through the bright streets, drawn by Nancy's eagerness to one of the shops where they had made their previous purchases, to ask about a photographer. She was in such spirits over the idea that she kept up the conversation and covered his silence; and he had conducted his cogitation to a most satisfactory end—the conclusion that Nancy had really shown originality in her remarks, and that it was a mere absurdity on his part to look for art knowledge from her—by the time they reached the shop, where they were received with the most cordial satisfaction, and where there were a great many new things to see which Nancy admired greatly.

The shopkeeper had no difficulty in indicating an artist of his own acquaintance who, he had no doubt, would do justice to madame, and would be too proud and happy to have such a subject. Arthur, however, came to himself when they had got this length, whether by the touch of the practical involved in buying some more pretty things for Nancy, or by the fact that he had proved her to his entire satisfaction to be quite justified in her indifference to the pictures in the Louvre; and he had sufficient good sense left to avoid the recommendation of the *modiste*, and take Nancy to a really good photographer, who gave them an appointment for the next day. They were both quite exhilarated by this engagement. It was something to do! They went

back to their hotel in the afternoon, consoled and happy, talking about it. And while Nancy reposed herself and took out her dress for the evening, Arthur went to look at the newspapers, as in duty bound. He took up the latest *Times*, and hid himself behind its ample sheet; but he did not get much good of his reading.

However distinctly you may make out that it is unreasonable to expect your bride to be interested in the interesting things of the place in which you are living, it is impossible to deny that it is very embarrassing when she is not. A girl who was frightened and chilled by Notre Dame, wearied at the Français, uninterested in the Louvre, what was her poor young husband to do with her? The weather was not favorable for those excursions which are so easy in summer. And, besides, what interest could there be in Versailles, for example, to one who knew nothing about the Grand Monarque, and probably had never heard of Marie Antoinette? People do not marry their wives or their husbands because they understand Molière, and love the great masters, and know Continental history; but it is bewildering to be in Paris, or anywhere else, for that matter, with a new companion who has no associations with anything, and is at once indifferent and ignorant of all that is in the past. What was he to do with her? Where was he to take her? Poor Arthur puzzled behind his *Times*, and did not know.

That evening he took her to the Gymnase, and at first the spell seemed to tell. Nancy for the first act gave her attention to the stage, and certainly it was not such a failure as the Français. There was a good deal of love-making, and that interested her. But it ended, as before, in disgust and weariness.

"I wish you would not take me to such places," she cried. "Is it because you are afraid of an evening at home? When we are settled at home at Underhayes you will be obliged to put up with me; there will be no play there."

This speech was particularly galling to Arthur, because he had not the slightest intention of settling at Underhayes, and to have it taken for granted gave him a pang which was chiefly terror. Should he be able to resist the foregone conclusion which thus had established itself in Nancy's mind?

"Indeed," he said, "I should be glad to stay at home. Indeed, I don't mind where I am, so long as you are there too. I do not care for the play."

"Then what do you go for? Ah! I know; to polish me up, to teach me how to behave, to remedy my defective education." This was once more said in the carriage as they were driving home.

"Nancy, you are unkind," said Arthur; "why should you speak to me so? I know nothing about defective education. I took you to amuse you. You thought you would like it."

"I did not know they were such poor sticks," said Nancy; "I did not suppose they would gabble their French so. The people in the shops talk a great deal better—I never mistake them; and it worries me to look so stupid," she added, relenting. "I should not mind for myself; but it looks so bad for you having a wife that does not understand."

"For me, my darling!" cried Arthur, delighted. "Do I care? An evening at home will be a great deal more pleasant; but my wife never looks stupid, cannot look stupid," said the foolish young man. And again all was well.

Thus the course of their honey-days went on, not without fluctuations. What he said in his foolishness was true so far, that Nancy did not look stupid. She looked careless, defiant, indifferent, scornful of what she saw, as of something which was not worth the trouble even of an effort to understand; but there was nothing stupid in her aspect at any time, and, in spite of herself, stray gleams of understanding came in to the girl's mind—gleams which did not enlighten her then; but which worked in the chaos, apart from any will of hers. Her will was all set steadfastly the other way—to reject all possibilities of improvement, and the idea of being educated up to her husband's level. Was not she as good as he, to start with? Was not her family as good as his family, if not better? Not so rich, but nicer, kinder people, to be upheld in their plainness above any attempt to pull them down.

Nancy's native energy of mind all ran into vigorous scorn of any attempt to separate her from her own race and identify her with his. To think of her old self in the pit, admiring her new self triumphant in a private box was a sensation which, all delicious as it was, originated in herself and was not betrayed to any one. Had Arthur seemed to think of this difference, Nancy would have proposed at once to descend to the pit as the preferable plan. She had made an immense ascent in the social scale by her marriage; but she never meant to acknowledge, not if she should die for it, that the ascent was of any consequence to her, or that it was expedient to change her manners or her smallest actions because of it. Was she not "good enough" for Arthur? Then why did Arthur choose to marry her? It was he who had asked her, she would have said, not she who had asked him. He had pledged himself to take her for better, for worse, but she had not pledged herself to change anything in her life or habits on his account, and she did not mean to do it. She was not a fine lady; she did not wish to look like a fine lady. It was far better that everybody should know what she was, and who she was, from the beginning.

The idea that Arthur had begun a process of education struck her suddenly after that visit to the Louvre. Why had he been so anxious that she should admire everything? Why should he take her to the theatre? He wanted her to learn French; but she would not learn French. She had not asked Arthur to marry her; he it was who had asked her, and he must take the consequences. She had no wish to be here in Paris. It would be far better to have a little house in Underhayes, where she could show her advancement to those who knew her, and distinguish herself in the only circle where, as yet, she wished to be distinguished.

Such was the course of thought in Nancy's mind. This was curiously interfered with by the new thoughts which arose in her in spite of herself; but she clung to it all the same. She would go back upon the first grievance of her dress, the pink silk, which he would not let her travel in, long after she had been convinced that the blue serge was better and m

and even looked better, which was the most difficult doctrine of all. She was quite aware that if she had known then as much even as she knew now, she would never have dreamed of setting out upon her journey in her salmon-colored "silk," yet still resented the fact that Arthur had objected to her "silk." She would not yield; she would not try to adapt herself to the "ways" he had been accustomed to. The Bateses were as good as the Curtises, and so she would prove. But every day, in spite of herself, Nancy became more and more aware how far different her habits were from her husband's, how unlike his were all her ways of thinking. But she would never, never give in, she said to herself. It was he who had asked her, not she who had asked him.

This was very different from Arthur's eager desire to make out, after every new demonstration of the difference between them, that Nancy could not act in any other way, that it was absurd to expect other things from her. He was by far the humblest of the two, the most tolerant and forbearing. Indeed, Nancy was not forbearing at all. She took offence at a look, and blazed into sudden wrath at the merest possibility of a suggestion of anything derogatory; whereas he bore numberless little shafts launched at his family, at fine people who thought themselves superior, at dainty ways and prejudices about dress and modes of living.

Whenever she showed her ignorance more conspicuously than usual, or was more painfully unequal to some claim upon her, poor Arthur plunged once again into thought, proving to himself that this was what he ought to have looked for, that nothing else would have been natural. He justified her in this way for everything she did, and everything she proved unable to do. But still it was rather a trying process, and the conclusion he came to, at the end of a week, was that Paris had not been a successful place to think of for the honey-moon. Honey-mooning is more difficult in winter than in summer. There is so much more to be done in the latter season, and the open air harmonizes a great many things; whereas two people not used to each other's society, not interested in the same pursuits, brought up in perfectly different ways, and with no resources, shut up together even in a beautiful little apartment in a fine hotel on the Rue de Rivoli, what are they to do? The photograph was a charming occupation for one day, and it was tolerably successful—as successful as photographs ever are, and was the object of great admiration in Underhayes, when, done up in a velvet frame, Nancy sent it home.

"I hope you are soon going to follow," Mrs. Bates wrote, and Nancy gave the letter to her husband to read. Certainly Paris had not been very successful. They had contented themselves with drives and walks, after that mournful day at the Louvre; had gone to the Bois, which was rather naked at this time of the year, and walked about and got tired. And in the evening they had sat "at home" in the hotel. But Nancy had nothing to do, not even a scrap of fancy-work, and, when Arthur read to her, fell asleep; and they went to bed very early, which both of them felt was always a virtuous thing to do, if rather dull. And thus a fortnight of the honey-*moon came, not very cheerfully, to* an end.

CHAPTER XIX.

"I DON'T think you care for Paris," said Arthur to his wife. They were driving out to the Bois, and the rain was drizzling, and it was not gay. There were fewer quarrels in this dull interval, but perhaps the part scarcely improved the liveliness, if it slightly added to the happiness, of their life.

"No," she said, with some vivacity; "not at all. It was very nice for a day or two. But now we seem to have got all we wanted, don't we, Arthur? Another afternoon in the Roo, or in the Palay Royal, just to pick up a few little presents, and I should be quite content to go as soon as you please."

"You have seen very little, Nancy."

"Oh! little? I have seen the whole place—all the best shops, and the best streets. I don't know what more there is to see."

"People will not talk about the shops and streets," said Arthur, in his most didactic way; "but about the pictures in the Louvre, and about Notre Dame; and what music you have heard, and what plays you have seen."

"I am sure mamma will never ask me any such questions," said Nancy; "and I don't suppose you are going to take me to see your great friends."

"That reminds me," said Arthur, nervously clearing his throat, "of a favor I was going to ask of you. Will you do something—that will be very disagreeable—for me, Nancy, for my sake?"

She looked at him very keenly, examining his face, conscious that this seeming simple prayer meant something more than appeared. "What is it?" she said, with a gleam of suspicion in her eyes.

"You will not promise, then? You are cautious, Nancy. I should have pledged myself to do anything and everything for your sake."

"What is it?" she repeated. "It is so easy to say what it is at once."

"It is this, then—do not reply in a hurry—I am very anxious about it, Nancy; don't you think you might write a few lines—to my mother?"

"To your mother!" The audacity of the proposal took away her breath.

"Yes, I am going to write, to say what I truly feel—that I am sorry to have offended her—"

"Sorry to have married me!" she cried, almost jumping out of the carriage in her vehemence. She looked at him, trembling with rage and wonder. How could he face her and ask such a thing? How could he frame the words? Did he think she was going to give in, to yield now, without rhyme or reason, she who was certainly determined never to yield?

"You know that is not the case," he said; "you know that I have not repented marrying you, and never will. But, Nancy, it is not for our happiness or—well, I will say interest, though it is an ugly word—to be estranged from my mother. I want to write to her to tell her that I am grieved—hush!—to have offended her. I should have known better. I should have managed so as that she might have seen you, known you, before she condemned me—"

"That is, that you are sorry you did not send me on approval, as the shopkeepers say—*me!*

Do you suppose I would have done it? Do you think I could have endured for a moment—"

"Can I not ask you a favor—acknowledging it to be a favor—without a quarrel?" said Arthur. "We have been married a fortnight, and how often have we quarrelled already? Nancy, is it worth the while? Could we not discuss a matter that concerns us both, calmly, without anger? If it seems to you impossible, say so. Am I unreasonable to torment you about a thing you refuse? But why quarrel? I hate it, and you cannot like it."

"How do you know I don't like it?" she cried; then stopped herself, with some dim perception of her folly. "I will not do it," she said, doggedly; "that is enough! My lady has never taken any notice of me—no, nor even your sister, that you are always holding up as a model. I will not lay myself down at their feet to be trampled upon; you may do it yourself, if you please."

"I shall certainly write," he said. "There will be no treading upon; but I shall write. If you will not do it, of course I cannot help it; but if you will be persuaded — out of your love for me — then I will be grateful to you, very grateful, Nancy. I will not say any more."

"I shall not do it," she said; and then there ensued a silence, which was so long that it alarmed her. Generally Arthur had been but too obsequious, anxious to make up, to clear away any lingering cloud; but this time he said nothing. The fact was that his mind was too full of a multitude of thoughts to leave him any time to speak. He was wondering, in a kind of desolate way, what to do. He had ceased to be an independent agent; he could not go there and come here at his own pleasure. To be sure, he was supposed to be the authority, to decide everything, to regulate every step they took; but how different this was in reality from the sound of it!

A man has a right to take his wife where he pleases—yes, when she will go; but if the man is a tender-hearted, generous, foolish, impulsive young fellow in love, what becomes of this sublime authority of his? Just about as much as comes of all the defences the law can place around a woman to save her from cruelty and oppression, when she happens to be of a like nature and loves her tyrant. Law is one thing, and love is another.

Arthur did not know how to oppose Nancy, how to make any move without her agreement and sympathy, and he had already had many indications which way her mind was fixed. She wanted to go home to England, to Underhayes; and he wanted her to stay away, to remove farther off from England. His whole mind was occupied by the discussion of expedients how to manage this, how to persuade her from her desire. And he was not even aware of the silence into which he sunk, and which she thought so deliberate, and done with so distinct an intention of punishing her.

They drove along in the victoria which had carried them about so often, side by side, neither saying a word. Already Nancy's appearance had changed. She had put aside her travelling-dress for another "silk" which Arthur had given her, and which was also dark-blue in color; over this she wore a warm mantle trimmed with soft fur about the throat and wrists, a delicate little bonnet, all corresponding, with that graceful Parisian taste which is not to be picked up in the Paris streets any more than in the London shops, but dwells in its own costly shrine apart. All this changed Nancy's appearance wonderfully.

There was still, perhaps, something in her bearing when she was on foot, that showed the tax-collector's daughter, the pretty girl of a country town—a little swing and loudness, a careless step and defiant pose; but in the carriage by her husband's side, wrapped up in those furs, reclining in absolute ease and well-being, Nancy might have been a duke's daughter, for anything any one could say. There were many of the people about who noticed them as they drove along, the handsome young English couple, usually so lively, to-day so taciturn.

A man cannot belong to "society," cannot be brought up at Eton and Oxford, even if he is not in society, without being known; and there were plenty of people who recognized Arthur Curtis, and wondered over his companion—who was she? They had not believed at first that she was his wife. One of these men, more curious than the rest, came to the edge of the pathway now, as the victoria got into the line and was obliged to go slowly.

"Curtis! is it really you, old fellow? I had been told you were here, but I could not believe my eyes."

"Was there anything so strange in my being here?" said Arthur, rousing himself up. This was one of the men who know everything and everybody; who have it in their power to convey a bad or good impression to more important persons than themselves. This put Arthur at once on his mettle. "You must let me introduce you to my wife," he said. "My friend, Denham, Nancy. We have not been very long here."

Nancy was excited by this sudden encounter with one of Arthur's friends, one of those, perhaps, who knew his "folks," and belonged to that unknown sphere of which she felt at once curious and defiant. She did not know very well what to do, whether to shake hands with him or to refrain. Happily the instinct of comfortableness which suggested no change of position made her bow only; and as this little gesture was accompanied by a blush, very natural to the bridal condition and sentiment, the new-comer swore to himself, by Jove! that, were she as good as she looked, Curtis had got a prize.

"Beg pardon for intruding on your domestic happiness," he said; "but the truth was I had not heard— Not much going on, is there? But Paris is as good a place as another for this dreary time of the year."

"No, I don't suppose there is much going on. We have been nowhere; and we are off again directly, for Rome, I think," said Arthur. "Paris is empty, like other places. We have not seen a soul we know."

"I don't suppose you were likely to look for them," said Denham. "Would Mrs. Curtis care to see the bear-fight in the Assembly? Sometimes it is fun. I will see after it, if you like, on the first good day."

"Should you, Nancy?" said Arthur, turning to her. Nancy had not a notion what the Assembly or the bear-fight was. She trembled in terror of saying something she who had never hesitated before

"I—don't know," she said; "I don't care for any—fighting."

"Oh, they are all muzzled," said Denham, laughing. "Meurice's? I will call and let you know."

"Thanks, but it is not worth the trouble; we shall be off in a few days."

"If you go to Rome, Neville is there," cried the stranger after them, as the line moved on more quickly; and he took off his hat to Nancy with a respectful politeness that enchanted her; she was pleased with the novelty of talking to a stranger even for a moment; it made the air a little less still and self-absorbed.

"Who is he?" she asked, with momentary awe.

"Denham, he's one of the attachés here—not a bad fellow, but talks like half a dozen old women."

"We need not mind how Mr. Denham talks," said Nancy, with a little elevation of her head. "We have nothing to be afraid of. He can talk as much as he likes for what I care."

"Isn't there? But he is Sir John, not Mr. Denham," said Arthur, carelessly.

Nancy sat a little more upright, shaking herself free of the wraps, and her eyes glistened. "Was that a baronet?" she said, with a little awe; then added, "And so will you be, Arthur. I don't understand saying anything but 'mister' to a gentleman. But you will be a baronet too."

"Not for a long time, I hope," said Arthur, with a sigh. It brought him back to all the tangled course of his own affairs. He was not by nature the kind of son who calculates on the time that must elapse before he comes to his kingdom, and it was very strange to him to see his wife's eyes brighten at the idea of that "rise in life," which meant his father's death. "Poor old governor, I hope he may live to be a hundred," he said, with a half-laugh, which was a half-sigh. Nancy did not join in this wish. She stared a little with consternation at the thought.

"What did — the gentleman — mean about bear-fighting? Is it a zoölogical garden? Assembly in some places means a ball," said Nancy: "it was rather a jumble; what did he mean?"

"He meant the French Parliament, in which they make the laws, as the House of Commons does in England—or, at least, we may say so for the sake of description," said Arthur; to which Nancy replied with a little startled "Oh!" of disappointment and suspicion.

"Do ladies go to such places? I thought ladies had never anything to do with politics."

"My dear Nancy," said Arthur, seizing the opportunity to be instructive, "when you go into society, you will find that people talk a great deal about such things, whether they care for them or not; they *are* the things that people talk about. And it is reasonable to think," he went on, more and more improving the occasion, "that, when you are in a foreign country, you should like to see what is most important in it. That is always taken for granted. You see Denham thought that was one of the things you would like to see."

This silenced Nancy more than could have been supposed possible. She had never seen this stranger before, and probably never would see him again; but the fact that he had expected *her to know what he meant, and to* be interested in the French Parliament, impressed her infinitely more than all Arthur's anxious efforts for her improvement. Were ladies like that? she could not help asking herself. What a bother it would be to be a lady, if that was the sort of thing they were expected to care for—a lot of old men making speeches, which she could not understand one word of! But that, of course, nobody could be supposed to know.

She was overawed, and received Arthur's sermon more meekly than she had received any of his didactic addresses before. She supposed now that sister of his, that Lucy, would have gone and understood every word; that she would have liked the play-acting, and talked about it, and laughed as Arthur did; that she would have seen a great deal in those stupid old pictures. Nancy was silent and dismayed. To be a lady seemed to her a hard trade. How different from the case of Underhayes, the talk about Lizzie Brown and Raisins, the grocer, in the snug parlor where everybody was so comfortable! Her mother and Sarah Jane never would ask her about the bear-fighting in the Assembly, nor how she liked M. Got. A longing for home seized the girl, and a terror of what seemed before her. To be sure, if she had known it, the talk about Lizzie Brown was quite as much in Sir John Denham's way as in that of Mrs. Bates; but then his Lizzie Brown was perhaps an empress, which makes a difference more or less. The two young people had never been so silent in each other's company. They drove back so full of many thoughts that neither perceived the preoccupation of the other, and oddly enough they were both thinking of their homes; Arthur, with a pang, but without any desire to find himself there—Nancy, with the strongest determination to get back.

There was a half-smile in Arthur's eyes, but a smile which was strangely associated with that pain behind the eyeballs and slight constriction of the throat which means unsheddable tears, as his home seemed to rise up before him among its woods. He saw his father in his library, his mother in that gilded and satin-hung morning-room—which was *à la Louis Quinze*, but which nobody thought in bad taste—as we see people in a dream. They did not look at him, nor welcome him, and he did not wish to be there. How could he take Nancy there? He was separated from them, perhaps forever, and he could scarcely wish it to be otherwise.

But Nancy, on her side, thought of home with much livelier feelings. Oh, only to be there! free to show all her pretty things, her new "silks," her trinkets and furs; to let everybody see how fine she was; to talk just as she liked, not to be made to admire anything she did not understand—not to be burdened with bonds beyond her comprehension, limits of speech, and word, and action, beyond which it was not "becoming," not "appropriate," not "right," perhaps, that she should go. At home she had done what she liked—run out-of-doors when she pleased, laughed as loudly as she pleased, been as ignorant as she pleased. It did not occur to Nancy that at home it had been her inclination to stand on her superiority, as one who had been five quarters at school, and was altogether "a cut above" Matilda and Sarah Jane.

They were sitting after dinner that evening, yawning a little, when Sir John Denham's card

was brought to Arthur. He looked at Nancy half doubtfully, an expression which she caught at once. "Shall he come up, or shall I go down to him?" he said.

"Oh, just as you like," said Nancy, with the quick thought passing through her mind that Arthur did not choose that his fine friends should see her. He looked at her again, in reality to see what she wished; but to Nancy it seemed an inquisitorial glance, criticising her all over, if perhaps she was "fit to be seen."

"I will go down and bring him up," he said. When he was gone, Nancy too looked at herself in one of the many mirrors. She still wore the dark-blue silk dress which had been made for her since she came to Paris, with ruffles of lace at the throat and wrists. It was very plain. Should she run and put on the salmon-colored one, which was a great deal finer, before Arthur returned with the stranger? She hesitated a moment, but her good angel interfered and kept her still. Sir John Denham thought her, on the whole, a lady-like young woman when he came into the room. Evidently there must be something queer about the business altogether, Denham thought; but she was very pretty, and looked *comme il faut*, so far as he could see.

"I have to make a thousand apologies," he said; "but I thought it better to run up and tell my story myself, hoping that Curtis would intercede for me as an old friend. May I be allowed to open my mouth at all, at such an inappropriate moment? A thousand thanks! I came to say that if you would be at the Palais de Justice at twelve to-morrow, I could meet you there with La Pic, who is a friend of mine, and would take you in. There is to be an *interpellation* which probably may be amusing; and if you are going on so soon—"

"It is very kind of you, Denham; I am sure my wife will like it."

"Mrs. Curtis looks a little doubtful, I think," said Denham; "but of course you must not mind me. It is only if it will amuse you."

Nancy vacillated between two courses: she was tempted to a little bravado, to avow boldly her ignorance, and shame the pretensions which her husband made on her behalf; and, on the other hand, she was also tempted to commend herself to this stranger, who was a real baronet, and finer than any one she had ever talked with before. Why should she let him see how little she knew? And in this wavering she took a long time to make up her reply.

"I do not understand much about—politics," she said.

"Especially French politics, I suppose," said Sir John, smiling and showing large white teeth. "So I should think, Mrs. Curtis. *I* don't understand them, though it is my business; but it is fine to see how they fly at each other, and will not keep still for all the presidents in the world. I hope Curtis has been letting you see a little of Paris. We must excuse him, I suppose, for keeping you so entirely to himself."

"We have been at a theatre or two," said Arthur, carelessly, "that is all: we are just passing through."

"And I am sorry there is nothing going on yet. After Christmas, if you were staying, I might be of more use. Some of the balls are worth going to in the Carnival. But why should I tell this to you who, probably, know a great deal better than I do—"

"Oh no," said Nancy, "I have never been in Paris before."

"Ah, that accounts—" said Sir John. "The fact is, I have been wondering that I had not seen you anywhere. What luck for Curtis to have so many new things to show you! But there is not much going on. I suppose you are going to Oakley for Christmas, Curtis. Lucky fellow, with nothing to do but amuse yourself. Put me at the fêet of the ladies there: I have not seen Lady Curtis or your sister for ages. A poor beggar like me would not know what to do with such a place, otherwise I should envy you Oakley. What a place! what woods! what a park! It is only in England that one sees anything like it."

"You were always a romancer, Denham. Oakley is nothing particular. Being home, it is very pleasant; but as a model of an English house—"

"I maintain it is, and Mrs. Curtis shall judge between us. It is not a feudal castle—I allow you might find finer things in that line; it has neither moat nor dungeon, I suppose; but for a gentleman's house—why, we have nothing in the least like it here. Don't you agree with me, Mrs. Curtis? You have not been long enough in the family to depreciate their good things as they do. I am sure you will give your vote for Oakley against anything you see between this and Rome, of its kind: I wait for your support."

It was a strange situation enough. Denham did not understand, but he divined, and liked to play with the unknown danger in Nancy's doubtful looks and Curtis's evident anxiety. As for Nancy, she looked at her husband with a perceptible tremor. She wanted him to instruct her, to indicate what she was to say: though, had it been possible that he could have dictated to her, that very fact would have made her perverse. At last she said, hesitating, "I have seen—so little—I could not judge. I have never been out of England before."

"Ah, that accounts—" said Denham, vaguely; and he was very much puzzled by this subdued bride, who had no enthusiasm either for the new world she was visiting or the old world which she had left so lately. He tried to draw her out on a variety of subjects; but Nancy, though at intervals an impulse of self-revelation would come upon her, and it was on her lips to tell him that she knew nothing of Oakley, and cared nothing, and should never be there, nor go to Rome, nor do any one of these things he was talking of, was, on the other hand, so afraid of betraying herself that she held back, looking stiff and silent, and scarcely could be got to say a word.

As for Arthur, his anxiety made him somewhat excited and restless; it took away all ease from his manner. He wanted her to join in the conversation, to come out of the shell of reserve in which she had shut herself up; and yet he was afraid of what she might say if once roused. She was a clever girl, with much natural energy and force; but yet it was annoying how entirely the daughter of Bates, the tax-collector, was at a loss listening to the conversation of the two men, who were not clever, yet who knew by nature

many things of which she had not a notion. This Assembly they wanted her to go to, what was it? Why should she go? What was an inter — inter — what? Their world and hers were totally different, though one of them was her husband. She was relieved when they veered into gossip and began to talk of people, though she did not know the people. There she could follow them even in her ignorance; for had not she, too, a Lizzie Brown?

CHAPTER XX.

"Why cannot we go home?" said Nancy. "I don't want to stay here. I don't want to go to your Rome, and places. What is the good of taking me away to make a show of me? I can speak English, but I don't know any of those jargons. I am sure it is not good French here; and as for Italian, I never heard a word of it. It is only to make me look ridiculous. Denham thinks so, Arthur. He comes and looks at me, and asks me about old Lady So-and-So. I tell him I don't know her, and I don't want to know her. I shall tell him some day I never knew Lady Anybody in my life, and that *I* am a nobody. I will, if you do not take me away."

"Do tell him so," said Arthur, "if you please. I don't mind what you tell him. You don't think I want you to make believe? You are all I wish for, Nancy, yourself — better than if you had known a dozen Lady So-and-So's."

"Oh, but I am sure you watch me," she cried. "I always feel that your eye is upon me, Arthur. You are afraid I will say something wrong; and I am afraid too, except when I want to do it: and if I should do it some time, as I am sure I will if we go on, you will not like it. Arthur, don't let us go farther off; let us go home."

"Home? where is home?" he said. "I don't know if I should have any welcome."

"But I should," cried Nancy. "Mother and all of them would dance for joy. And think how much better we should be. We must be spending a mint of money here. You talk of going farther, but I don't believe you will be able to go farther, when you look into it. And I don't know what we have to spend: you don't tell me anything."

"I scarcely know myself," said Arthur, with rather a bewildered look upon his face. "I don't know what my father—things should be different now."

"And you are going away travelling without knowing? You will find," said Nancy, becoming practical all at once, "that we have spent a great deal of money; always having carriages and going to the play—"

"Not to many plays."

"Two; and that music Denham gave us tickets for—"

"My darling, don't be angry—but would you mind saying Sir John?"

"Why should I say Sir John? You always call him Denham. And when we went to that Assembly there was another carriage. I suppose it would always be the same if we were going to other places; but at Underhayes it would *not be like that. We could take a little* house and furnish it; and you have such good taste, Arthur. We would make it so pretty, and everybody would be delighted to see us. I should manage everything, and keep the expenses right, and you—you—"

"Yes!" said Arthur, taking her hands into his as she stood by him. "What for me? I should have nothing to do."

"Well! when one has plenty to live on, what does it matter? It will always be delightful. We shall take walks. Don't you remember the common, how beautiful it was? And now and then we will go to London; and in the evening we can—you can read out loud to me," said Nancy, stopping, with a little confusion. "We can go and see mother," was what she was about to say; but she stopped instinctively, and kept that in the background. She was standing by his chair, putting her fingers through his hair, arranging and rearranging it with soft touches, each one of which was a caress. It was seldom that she was in this tender mood, and he felt himself melting under it. Sometimes she would stoop down and put her cheek against his. "You would teach me all sorts of things," said Nancy. "Sometimes I know I am not good-tempered, Arthur. I give you a great deal of trouble. It makes me wild to think that I am not like you, that I don't do you credit; and then my temper gets the better of me, and I say I am as good as they are—why should I trouble?"

As she made this confession, tears came trembling into Nancy's eyes and stole into her voice. She had never before revealed to her husband the state of mind which made her so capricious, and as she told it, all those vagaries of temper which had tormented Arthur became sacred things to him, and beautiful in the light of love and penitence. He took into his arms this tender culprit, whose avowal made all her faults into virtues.

"Don't, my darling!" he cried; "don't! Not like me! You are far better than I am. Not do me credit! Nancy! don't you know I am as proud of you as I am fond of you—and can anything be more than that? Teach you! What could I teach you? It is you who teach me."

And he meant what he said, and she meant it, to the bottom of their foolish young hearts; and it was all true and all false, as only human things can be. Nancy, though her heart was melting and running over with the tenderness of her confession, was as ready to be defiant as ever at half a moment's notice, and Arthur as sure soon to be doubtful of her, alarmed and anxious, uncertain as to what she might do or say. But neither of them was at all aware of this as they clung together and mutually repented, and declared that never again, never again, should anything disturb their harmony and full understanding of each other.

"There are so many things you could teach me," Nancy said, smiling through her tears, "in our own little house at home! You could make a lady of me. Oh yes, we all thought you had done that when we were married, but now I know better. But you can make a lady of me, Arthur, if you will try."

"You are a lady already, my darling," he said; but how sweet was this consciousness of what was wanting in herself, and the confidence

that he could communicate all she wanted! It was like an inspiration direct from heaven.

"I will study whatever you wish," said Nancy. "We could give ourselves up to it if we were only in a little house of our own. Whatever you please, Arthur: French if you like, for I am ashamed not to understand it when you talk it so well, and I don't think it can have been much good what I learned at school; and about pictures and buildings, and everything. I don't know *anything*, Arthur. I could not understand the things you were talking about, Denham and you; and I know you were vexed about the pictures, and the theatre."

"No, my sweetest, I was not vexed—perhaps a little disappointed; but I knew it was because you had not seen any before."

"That was all. I know a little better already; and, Arthur, if you were to give this winter to it, and help me, in our own little house. So near London as Underhayes is, we could go up and see things; and you could read books to me. I think I can see it all," said Nancy, smiling upon him with her wet eyes: "a little drawing-room with lace curtains and windows that opened to the garden, and another nice little room with your pipes in it, where I could come and sit by your side while you smoked your cigar!"

"But, Nancy, might not all this beautiful picture come to pass just as well in Italy? You don't know what Italy is. None of your dull wet days, but always soft, bright, sunshiny weather, and the bluest sky, and such moonlight nights! We need not go to Rome at all. I know a little village up among the woods, with a view of the sea. Nancy, you can't think how beautiful it is!"

"I don't care," she said, with a little pout. "I don't want to go to Italy. It is so far, so far away; and I cannot speak the language; and it is so dreary to live among people, and hear them chattering, and not understand."

"But you would very soon learn Italian. It is the easiest language—everybody says so," said Arthur. "You could pick it up in a few weeks. You would so soon feel at home there. The good people are fond of everything that is beautiful. Oh, they are not all good people, I suppose. Sometimes they will ask too much from you; they will, perhaps, cheat you a little, in quite a friendly way—"

"I could not endure that!" cried Nancy. "That is the one thing I could not put up with; and foreigners are all like that, Arthur; they pretend kindness so long as they have something to gain; but they don't really care. Oh! there is nothing like England," she cried, clasping her hands, "and a little house of our own! And in the summer, when, perhaps, your people may have changed their mind, Arthur, *then* I should not be afraid to meet with them. I should know a great many things that I don't know now. And we should be so happy, both together, and no one to interfere with us."

Arthur was moved to the bottom of his heart. It did not occur to him to think of her own description of "foreigners," who pretend kindness as long as they have something to gain. Nay, more than that, *she* did not think of it either. Nancy was quite sincere. By talking about it, she had made a certainty in her own mind that this was really all she wanted; that in such circumstances happiness would come of itself; without frets or interruption; and in what other way could that be secured? She was so earnest in carrying her point, that she really felt all she expressed. Whereas, if he took her away, if he insisted on *his* plan, Nancy felt that she could not answer for herself. It was for his sake as well as hers; it was for their good as well as for their happiness. And what could Arthur answer to all this? The fact that she wanted anything, was not that the most powerful argument for having it? His own inclinations were strongly in favor of absence, and he believed that this teaching of which she spoke, and which he had fully intended, could get itself accomplished far better on the Riviera, or in the villa among the chestnut-woods at Castellamare than anywhere near the house of the Bateses.

But what could he do or say against her? He tried to beguile her into talk of what might happen after, when they would go into society, and when, perhaps, he should be able to take her to Oakley to see all its beauties. But this was a subject of which Nancy was very shy. She would not speak of Arthur's "people," whom she no longer called "folks." When she did make their acquaintance, she wanted to do so in a way which would dazzle them. She could not tolerate the idea of any condescension on their part to Arthur's wife. No, she must have surmounted all difficulties, and feel able to consider herself as much a lady as any of them, before she met those ladies who were her natural enemies and rivals. For Arthur's sake she would avoid them until she could burst upon them in full glory of new instruction and knowledge.

"Don't speak to me about Oakley," she said. "It was all I could do to make sure Oakley was its name when Denham talked of it. It makes me angry to hear of it. I, your wife, not to know it, not to know anything about it or them, when every poor creature of an ambassador's flunkey goes there!"

"Don't be too hard upon old Denham," said Arthur, laughing. "How he would be pleased to hear you! But not Denham, Nancy, if you love me. Your mouth was not made to drop words in that careless way."

"Oh, nonsense, Arthur! What should I say? Sir John is so formal. *You* would not say Denham if it was wrong," said Nancy, recovering a little from the too great amiability of this episode; and then she added, "You have asked me to do something for you. I will do it. I will not bargain with you, but I will do it; only you must not see my letter, or school me. I will write out of my own head."

"Will you, Nancy? You are always a darling, always kinder than I deserve: but at least you will let me see it—send it with mine?"

"No," she said; "no, no, no; but I will write. Now, will that please you? And you will yield to me, like a dear good Arthur, and take me home? I do so wish to go home!"

"That looks as if you were tired of me, Nancy."

"Does it?" she said, with a smile, putting her arm softly about his neck.

She was not addicted to caresses. There was a kind of rude delicacy and reserve in her, which a little more gentleness of manner would have

made into that exquisite bloom of modesty which is the crown of all graces. That soft touch said more from her than the utmost *abandon* of lovingness from another. Poor Arthur was all subdued; he could not resist her; her tenderness filled him with happiness beyond expression. If she would but be always thus, in spite of all he might have to pay for it, what man was there in the world so blessed as he? That even at this exquisite moment he had the strength of mind not to commit himself finally to the carrying-out of her wish was more than could have been expected. It was, perhaps, because "Denham" arrived at that moment to accompany them to a morning performance at the "Conservatoire," for which his zeal had with difficulty got them tickets. They had not wanted to go, but "Denham" had insisted upon it. Nancy went away to put on her bonnet as he came up-stairs. How near she had been to success! Her heart was full of confidence and pleasure in the thought, and this gave a brightness to her countenance which was all it wanted.

"What have you been doing to your wife? She is radiant. She will have a great *succès*, and you and I will shine in her lustre," said their companion to Arthur, as they arrived at the concert-rooms.

How proudly Arthur looked at her, exhilarated yet subdued as she was by that delightful sense of having got, or nearly got, her own way! This happiness had taken from Nancy the look of defiant watchfulness which generally gave a sense of unrest and discomfort to her beauty. For the first time since their marriage she looked at her ease and unafraid. He was so absorbed in her that he did not see a well-known face close to him, nor dream of any interruption of his felicity, until, at the first interval in the music, some one reached a fan across from another bench and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Why, Arthur, Arthur! don't you know us?" a voice said. It seemed to curdle the blood in his veins. He turned round with a sense of absolute dismay.

Behind him—how could he have missed the gray head of the old Indian, the overwhelming bonnet of his aunt, the demure correctness of the English young lady, all three in a row?—sat General Curtis, his uncle, father of the Rev. Hubert, who was Rector of Oakley, with the two ladies who ministered to him. What so natural as that these excellent people should be in Paris? They were on their way home from the German baths, where the general went for his gout. And the wife and daughter, worn to death by the process which screwed the general up for the rest of the year, had need of a little taste of Paris to refresh their jaded souls. It was Mrs. Curtis who called "Arthur, Arthur!" A discussion had gone on between the three from the moment that Arthur appeared with the young woman, whose advent filled these ladies with a thrill of curiosity. "Don't you meddle with what don't concern you," growled the general. Arthur was known to have made a dreadful connection, to have married somebody who was nobody, and generally to be in a bad way; and the sight of Nancy had startled this group beyond expression, as she came in, looking *happy and beautiful*, in her dainty Parisian bonnet.

"*She looks a perfect lady*, mamma. Why shouldn't we?" said Mary Curtis, who was charitable and disposed to be "gushing."

"It concerns us as much as it concerns any one, except his father and mother," Mrs. Curtis said. Both wife and daughter were disposed to be rebellious to the dictum of the head of the house; they had gone through so much for him. Now they were on ground which they felt to be their own, and on which he was no longer supreme, and his opposition quickened their desire to penetrate Arthur's mystery. No one in the family had seen her; they would be the first, and even that thought was pleasant. "That is Sir John Denham on the other side: if she was very bad, would he show himself with them *in public?*" said Mrs. Curtis.

"What does a fellow like that care?" the general growled back. "The *demi-monde* is what he likes best."

"Oh, hush, Anthony, think of Mary!" said his wife. "He may like the *demi-monde*, as you say; but I don't think he'd like to show himself with them *in public*. And really she looks very nice. What a pretty bonnet! Anthony, you cannot pass by your own nephew!"

"I won't have anything to say to him; if you do, you must take the consequence," said the general.

"Oh, do, mamma, do!" cried Mary, at her other side. And the result was that Mrs. Curtis put her fan over somebody's shoulder and called "Arthur, Arthur!" and filled the young man's mind with unutterable dismay.

"Aunt Curtis!" said Arthur, rising to his feet. He grew crimson with the sudden emergency, with the surprise. "Who would have thought of seeing you here?"

"Indeed, if you had thought at all on the subject, you might have made sure we should be here," said Mrs. Curtis, and then she stooped forward and raised her head to whisper: "She is very pretty, Arthur, and of course you think her as nice as she is pretty. Would she like to be introduced to me?"

"She must be, now that you are here," said Arthur, not with any great eagerness. He took her offer a great deal too easily as a matter of course, not as the distinguished kindness she intended it to be. But her curiosity had reached to a very high point, and there was a touch of kindness as well as of self-importance in the idea of being able to mediate in the family affairs. Besides, Sir John Denham was chatting familiarly on the other side of the bride, whose looks in her Paris bonnet were unexceptionable; and Sir John Denham was a very useful man to know in Paris, and one before whom many doors opened. And though her husband grumbled and held back, her daughter was still more anxious than she was.

"Oh, Arthur, how pretty she is!" Mary Curtis murmured to her cousin, while her mother made up her mind. It was Mary or some one like her who ought to have been elected to fill the post Nancy had secured, to become the future Lady Curtis. If that post had been filled up by competitive examination, as men's situations are nowadays, no doubt Mary would have got it; and looking at it entirely as a public position, without reference to Arthur (who, after all, was but a necessary adjunct, and not everything), Mary felt a lively interest, touched with

doubt of her qualifications, in the successful candidate. She was anxious to inspect her, to have the satisfaction of feeling, which is a very general sentiment, that she herself could have done it better. Would this girl have the least idea how to behave in so important a post? Mary gave her mother little pushes and pinches to urge her on.

"I hope you have taken her to see your mother, Arthur," said Mrs. Curtis: "she is, of course, the first person to be thought of. Ah, you have not, you naughty boy! Well, if you wish it, I will go and speak to her before the music begins again. No, Mary, not you; you had better stay where you are. Papa will be vexed if we both go."

"Oh, papa! It is always papa!" said Mary, as her mother swept past her, almost sweeping her out of her seat. Mrs. Curtis was large and ample both in figure and drapery, and looked like Society impersonated as she swept round in front into the vacant space before Nancy, with a solemnity becoming the occasion. Nancy looked up, alarmed at the coming of this large lady; and if it was partly defiance and resistance, it was also partly shyness and fright, and ignorance as to what it was right to do, that kept her from rising to receive this imposing introduction. Mrs. Curtis made her a courtesy, which the girl, blushing hotly, and confused between pride and shame and helpless ignorance, returned only with a little tremulous inclination of her head. Oh, if she only knew what was the most polite, yet the most disdainful, thing to do!

"I am afraid you scarcely know who I am," said the large lady. "Arthur has not had much time yet to tell you about his relations. I am your husband's aunt, Mrs. Arthur; we are all very fond of him. But you have not seen any of the family yet, I am sorry to hear."

"No," said Nancy, feeling waves of hot blood come up to her temples. She confronted her new acquaintance without looking at her, with eyes half concealed by her eyelids, dumbly defiant. Arthur's relations might come and stare at her, and talk to her as they pleased, but she would make no advances. And they could not make much, she thought, out of yes and no.

"Arthur shall tell me where you are, and I will come to see you to-morrow," said Mrs. Curtis. "I think it is only right for his sake, and I hope you will not be frightened of me. I will do anything I can to be of use to you, for Arthur's sake; that is, of course, if you wish it. Sir John Denham, I think," she added, turning to him. Denham had withdrawn a few steps from the family meeting, as courtesy demanded. "I met you, I think, years and years ago at the Carringtons', though I see you have forgotten me."

"As if that were possible!" said Denham, in a tone which half offended Nancy. He had pretended to be her friend and Arthur's; yet here he was just as friendly with the enemy. "But they are going to begin again, I am afraid. Will you take this place?" he said, offering her his vacant chair. Mrs. Curtis paused to reflect that to place herself beside Arthur's wife *in public* was more than was required of her; more, indeed, than was perfectly discreet in the circumstances. So she made her doubtful niece-in-law a bow, and took Arthur's arm again.

"I must return to my own party, I fear," she said; "but I shall hope to see you to-morrow." Nancy found herself for a moment left entirely alone, while this unexpected intruder upon her happiness squeezed back again into her place; for Denham too had deserted her, as she saw by a backward glance, to renew acquaintance with the fine young lady behind, with whom Arthur too lingered, leaving her seated there in front alone. The din of the orchestra recommenced, which Nancy was not sufficiently instructed to admire, and her head began to ache with jealous pain and misery. The heat of the place, the languor of the afternoon, the crash of the music, made an atmosphere of confusion and sickening incongruity all around her. Oh, to be in the little parlor at home again! Oh, to be Nancy Bates, with no fine ladies to question, or fine gentlemen to thrust the village girl to the front of this alien assembly, where all the people knew each other, and understood what was going on, except only she! These women! She had never expected any inquisition of this kind. She would have liked to jump up and rush away, no matter where, only to be free of it all. She said to herself she could not bear it. She would go home, whatever happened; with Arthur or without Arthur, it did not seem to matter now.

CHAPTER XXI.

Nancy had plenty of time to calm herself down before she received the promised visit of Mrs. Curtis. And Arthur, who had always been so anxiously compliant with all her wishes, and so ready to excuse all her shortcomings, looked so serious when she burst out into vituperation of the "big, fat woman," and declared her determination not to be spied upon, that even her impetuosity owned a check.

"If you insist upon going away and not receiving her, it will be a great vexation and pain to me," he said; "and your own good sense will show you, Nancy—"

"I have no good sense!" said the excited creature. "I never pretended to be sensible! You knew what I was when you married me, Arthur; and to be spied upon, and examined all over by a set of women—I can't bear it, and I won't, not for anybody in the world; not even for you!"

Poor Arthur did not make any immediate reply. He walked about the little room with agitated steps; then went and stood at the window, looking out with a blank and hopeless face. Perhaps silence was, of all others, the thing which Nancy could least encounter. She sat gazing at him, ready to make off in a moment to her room, to snatch her hat, and fly out, she knew not where; anywhere to escape from those shackles of her new life which were so intolerable. That he would rush after her, entreat her to return, promise everything that she wished, seemed certain to Nancy. She did not calculate upon this, but was sure of it without thinking. But his silence chilled her; and when he spoke, it was in a voice she did not recognize—a voice out of which all the music and sweetness seemed to have gone.

"I don't know if this will have any influence upon you," he said, "but it is worth thinking

of—that we cannot live utterly estranged from my family. Some time or other we must seek a renewal of intercourse. *I* must seek it, not they; and if my Aunt Curtis could in the mean time convey a pleasant impression of you—if she was herself won to be on our side—I don't say it would be of great consequence, but yet it would be a beginning. I don't know what you think of my family, Nancy—if you think they are some kind of wild beasts to be avoided; but they can't be avoided. We shall have to live by them, and it is for our good—it is indispensable—that we should be friends."

"Friends!" cried Nancy, breathless with the effort of listening to him and keeping silence. "Then you may as well throw me over once for all, Arthur. Friends! with those that would take no notice of me—that never so much as named me in their letter."

"That was my fault—that was my fault," he said, turning round upon her. "I had no right to keep them in the dark. I ought to have gone to my mother and told her, not kept everything in holes and corners."

"You were not a baby!" cried Nancy. "Why, you are four-and-twenty! Men don't go and ask their mamma's leave, like girls."

"That may be; but neither do men throw all their relatives over—tear themselves apart from their family. And I will not do it," said Arthur, with sudden self-assertion. "I will do anything in the world to please you but this. I will not quarrel with all who belong to me. As soon as I get an opportunity we must be reconciled to them—*must*, Nancy; there is no alternative. And why should you reject this easy way? My aunt is a kind woman. She will do us a good turn if she can. Try to please her, dear; won't you try to please her for my sake?"

Nancy had started to her feet, when he said with such energy that he would not do it; but something arrested her. Whether the reasonableness of it, which was not likely, or the new force and vigor with which he spoke, or the pathos of the entreaty at the end, it would be difficult to say. But she was arrested, her attention caught, and the rush of her hasty blood restrained. After all, perhaps, there was something in what he said. It was not worth her while to fly from them, to avoid them as if she was afraid; but rather to show them her own superiority, to convince them that she was as good as they were, and had no occasion to fear them. This, perhaps, was scarcely the sentiment inculcated by Arthur's speech; but rather the turn it took in the alembic of her own mind, in which a hundred crude ideas were fermenting and getting fused daily. She sat down again after a moment, when he had ceased speaking.

Arthur, notwithstanding his appeal, had excited himself too much to care precisely what she was thinking, and even this gave a wholesome stimulus to the turn in the tide of her thoughts. He did not care, but he should be made to care; he should be proud of her; he should feel that those people who slighted her were slighting something above themselves. She would not yield so far as to say anything, to give her promise that she would endeavor to conciliate Mrs. Curtis—not for her life; but *what she said* did not need to be any criterion *of what she would do.* She took up a book which happened to be on the table, and pretended to read it with an absolute absorption of interest which justified her silence; while he, on the other hand, having no certainty that he had moved her, but rather fearing the worst, kept pacing up and down between the window and the door, excited beyond the immediate question, having, for the first time, opened up the ultimate matter with himself. And when he once began to think of it, he could not shake off the idea. It was no question of expediency or possibility—a thing which ought to be done, perhaps, yet might not.

It seemed to him, thinking of it, that he must at once explain everything, and claim his forgiveness and the reception of his bride. "I have done wrong; but it cannot be undone; nor is the wrong half so serious as you think." This was what he must say. He had intended to write ever since he got to Paris, but had deferred it as an unpleasant business which might stand off from day to day. But now it appeared to him, all at once, that nothing was so important. Whatever else he did, he must reconcile himself with his father and mother, his own flesh and blood. If they would not, he must bear it; but nothing must be left undone on his part. This sudden conviction was brought upon him: was it by the sight of his relations—was it by Nancy's unreasonable and absurd antipathy to them? He could not tell; but the fact that he could think of any sentiment on Nancy's part as absurd and unreasonable showed what a leap he had suddenly made.

It was not till several hours later that Mrs. Curtis and her daughter appeared; for this time Mary had insisted upon coming, defying papa.

"We have done nothing but think of papa for the last three months," she said. "I think we may be allowed a little of our own way now."

Mary was very exact and particular, the essence of English duty and exact young-ladyhood. But there is a point at which duty and self-abnegation stop; and certainly, after spending three months at a German bath, a handmaiden to gout, it is not to be expected that the fortnight in Paris was to be spent in absolute devotion at the same gloomy shrine, especially as the general was better, and wound up for the year by all the sulphur he had imbibed. The young lady came accordingly with her mother, curious, and indeed eager, to see how the successful competitor acquitted herself.

"Is she a lady?" Mary had said on the previous evening, cross-questioning her mother; but Mrs. Curtis had declined to commit herself.

"She said nothing but no, that I heard. How could I tell from a No?"

"I could have told, if she had only coughed," Miss Curtis replied; and it may be supposed with what keen eyes she was prepared to investigate her new cousin. They were so late in coming that Arthur had gone out, and Nancy, in her blue gown, sat by the fire alone just as the afternoon sunk into twilight. They could not even see each other very clearly, and Nancy did not give them a very warm welcome. She stood up against the light, so that they could not make out a feature of her, and made them a stiff little bow, which was very awkward and self-conscious, yet not ungraceful. And then they seated themselves, not by Nancy's invitation. The log blazed

up compassionately now and then on the hearth, and threw a gleam upon the three half-perceptible faces. It was a strange little scene in that genteel comedy which we call real life.

"I am sorry we are so late," said Mrs. Curtis. "We have been seeing our friends and making a few necessary purchases; and it is astonishing how trifles take up a winter's day: it is soon over at this time of the year. We have stayed longer than we meant to do in Germany, the weather has been so mild. I hope the general may be able to come to see you before we leave; but he has to take care of himself just now, after his baths." As all this elicited no response, Mrs. Curtis continued, "Is Arthur out?"

"Yes." Nancy had intended to keep to her monosyllables, but it was difficult, and she added, in spite of herself, "I expect him back very soon; he thought it was too late for you to-day."

"I am so sorry; if he had been here, he would have made us acquainted."

"On the contrary," said Mary, striking in, "I think, if Mrs. Arthur will not mind, it is better my cousin should not be here. Women understand each other better alone. Don't you think so? I feel sure of it, for my part."

"I don't know," said Nancy, out of the partial gloom; and then there was a pause.

Mrs. Curtis made a fresh start, and the aspect of affairs was so strange, and the absolute passiveness of Nancy so apparent, that all polite feints were impossible, and the visitor plunged into the heart of the one subject, the only subject on which they could approach each other, feeling herself forced into it, whether she would or not.

"I hope you will not think what I am going to say intrusive; but may I ask if it is true that you have not seen anything of your husband's family, Mrs. Arthur—his immediate family—Lady Curtis, or Lucy, or any of them? Is it so, indeed? But I hope you will do all you can to reconcile your husband with them. It cannot be good for you to be estranged."

"I know nothing about them," said Nancy, with a toss of her head.

"Indeed! I am very sorry for it. I think Arthur might have managed better. If he had played his cards rightly, when they saw it could not be helped they would certainly have yielded, and taken some notice of you."

"I wanted none of their notice!" cried Nancy, crimson with anger; and then Mary interfered.

"Mamma, I don't think you are treating it in the right way," she said. "Mrs. Arthur does not know Aunt Curtis. Oh, what a pity that your people did not insist on seeing my aunt and uncle! That would have made everything easy. But I suppose you did not know."

"We did not care!" said Nancy, growing hotter and hotter. She would make no other reply.

"But your people might have cared," said Mrs. Curtis, "as my daughter says. I hope you will not take it amiss if I say that there has been very great negligence somewhere; and you ought to do all you can to set things to rights. It is all settled now, and past changing. Don't you think that you should try to mend matters? Arthur may be very fond of you; I dare say he is; I am sure he has given good proof of it; but he cannot be *happy separated* from his family."

"Then he can go back to his family!" cried Nancy, with flashing eyes, rising suddenly to her feet. "If you are specimens of his family, coming and abusing me like this, when you don't even know me—"

"I do not think, Mrs. Arthur, that you are taking what we say in a very friendly way. What object could we have in coming but to assist you—or, rather, Arthur—in the circumstances? For, of course, we think most of him—it is only natural; and surely it is your duty to do what you can, as it is you who have brought him into trouble. It cannot be any offence to you to say as much as that."

"I wish you would go away!" cried Nancy, hotly. "What have you to do coming here, only to tell me that I am in Arthur's way? How have I got him into trouble? Did I go and ask him to marry me? Did I make love to him? You think I am only a common girl, and you are ladies. Ladies! Do ladies behave so?—to bully a girl when she is by herself, when no one is by—a girl who has never done any harm to them—who is as good as they are?"

"Oh, this is too much!" cried Mrs. Curtis. "I came to give you advice for your good—for Arthur's sake; and this is how you receive it! I wanted to help you if I could."

"I did not ask any one's help," said Nancy, defiant, facing them, always with her back to the light, invisible except as a shadow. Her heart beat so that every vein felt bursting. She had but one desire in her mind, and that was to rush off, without stopping to see Arthur, without giving any one the opportunity of insulting her further, and fly home as fast as the fastest train would carry her. What were the Curtises to Nancy? How could she bear this from any one, to be schooled and dictated to—she who had never been scolded even at home, who had never been found fault with, whose whole being rose up in arms against any one who ventured to criticise? There are people in all classes who are thus intolerant of a word, not to be interfered with, whom it is mortal offence to think less than perfect. She felt as if the blood in her veins had turned to fire.

"Mamma," said Mary, "Mrs. Arthur is quite right. We have no business to come here into her own rooms, and tell her what she ought to do. She knows better what to do than we can tell her. Why should you interfere?"

"Because Mrs. Arthur is young, and does not know, Mary; and it is her duty to listen when one speaks for her good," said Mrs. Curtis, furious in her turn. "But you need not be afraid; I will not say any more. I will only bid you good-morning, Mrs. Arthur. It is no object to me what you do, or don't do. If I could have smoothed matters, I would; but I will not force my good offices upon you. I hope you will make your husband very happy, for otherwise I am sure he will be very miserable. He was always on such good terms with his family, and now you have made a complete breach."

"Will you go away?" cried Nancy, wild with anger.

She made a step forward, with her arm lifted. It is not likely that any provocation would have made her strike; but if the two ladies, alarmed, thought she was about to do so, no one could blame them. This appearance of violence ar

palled them. Such a threatening aspect in a woman was so foreign to the customs of society, so tremendous a breach of all decorum, that actual blows would have had no greater effect upon them. They both retreated before her, with alarm in their startled movements. Nancy could not see their faces, nor could they see hers.

"Indeed, we will go!" cried Mrs. Curtis, with tones which were tremulous with wonder and anger, and the kind of moral fright which has been indicated.

Mary had got her hand upon the door to open it, when some one suddenly pushed in from outside, and Arthur came into the room.

"What is the matter?" he cried.

All he could see was his wife against the light of the window, threatening, with her arm raised as if in the act to strike.

"Oh, Arthur, stand between us and her!" cried Mrs. Curtis. "But I will not stay here another moment. Your wife has ordered us out! You poor boy! you can come to me if you like. Good-bye. I am very sorry for you; but I cannot stay another moment here."

"What is the matter?" he repeated, with a voice which was sharp and keen as a sword, as the two ladies disappeared hurriedly, and he stood alone opposite to his wife, gazing at her with eyes that blazed through the gloom. Her hand had dropped by her side at his entrance, but at the sound of his voice Nancy, who was beside herself with passion, raised it again and shook it at him in speechless excitement, then turned and fled into her own room, clashing the door behind her. He heard her lock it in a rage, panting for breath as she dashed away.

Poor Arthur! he had no mind to follow her. She might have spared herself that precaution. He stood upon the hearth, looking mournfully into the big mirror, in which he could see himself a shadow in the surrounding gloom. Had not all life turned into a vision of shadows, everything that was lovely and fair disappearing from about him? There seemed no power in him to do anything. To go after his aunt, and endeavor to make up for his wife's incivility, was as impossible as to go after that wife and demand the meaning of her strange conduct. He had no heart for anything. He stood, as it were, amidst the ruins of his bridal happiness, everything crumbling about him. Only to-day, only a few hours ago, she had stood by him, beguiling him with sweet smiles and caresses, she who this minute had confronted him like a fury, with her hand clenched, threatening violence. He had borne a good many shocks in this eventful fortnight; the bloom had been taken off his fond fancy of perfection in his bride; but this was the climax of all. It seemed to take at once his strength and his hope away.

Meanwhile Nancy, her blood boiling, her countenance flushed, her eyes fiery with passion, had rushed out of the darkness into the soft light of her room, where the candles had been lighted, and where she saw herself entering like a fury in the great glass which was opposite to her as she rushed in. This sight made her pause in spite of herself; it sobered her all at once. Was that the aspect she had borne to these strangers? *to her husband?* The sudden shock of her own *appearance had more effect upon* her than any amount of moral reprobation. She calmed down in a moment. They had insulted her, she tried to say to herself; but what would they think of her? was what conscience said in her. What would they think of her?—and Arthur? The color went out of the foolish creature's face; a chill came over her. Oh, what was she to do, what was she to do? She had meant to impose upon them, to be more lady-like, more calm, more chilly in her politeness than any one could be; and this was what it had come to. She threw herself down by her bedside in a passion of tears and penitence.

Had Arthur come to her then, she would have thrown herself at his feet and asked his pardon; but Arthur was kept from her by the bolt she had herself drawn in her fury, and by—though this she was unaware of—the despair and dismay in his heart. She threw herself on the carpet, and found relief in a torrent of tears. Such tears! hot as her passion, overwhelming as the impulses that surged after one another through her heart. He must hear her sob, she felt, in the *abandon* of her misery; and though Nancy did not sob to be heard, it gave her a flutter of hope to think that he must hear her, and must come to know what it was—to comfort her, even to scold her, it did not matter, so long as he came. But not a sound except those sobs of hers broke the silence. The candles burned softly, and glimmered in the mirror, which reflected her lying there upon the flowery whiteness of the carpet, a dark, miserable figure; but there was no tap at the door, no voice asking for admission.

After a little time, her passion being spent, she raised herself up, and without drying the tears from her woe-begone countenance, or arranging her disordered hair, opened the door softly, and looked into the sitting-room where she had left him. All was changed there: the candles were lighted, the fire remade, the room full of warmth and light; but no Arthur. It was vacant, put in good order by the servants, who knew nothing about what had been happening there. And Arthur was gone. Where had he gone? Had he followed those women, who were his relations, though they were her enemies? Was he hearing their story, who doubtless would paint her as a very devil of ill-temper and pride? Had he gone over to the other side, he who was the cause of it all? Her eyes began to flash again, and her veins to refill with that fire which had all but died out of them. She went back to her room, and dipped her burning forehead into the water, and smoothed her hair, which she had pulled out of place with her passionate hands. When she had done this she stood for a moment between the two rooms in the silence, alone, asking herself what she should do. Had Arthur gone from her? Would he not come back again?

A speechless dismay took possession of her soul, followed by flashes of passion, and still deeper and deeper despondency. There was but one thing that it seemed possible to do, except flight, which she was not equal to at this dreadful moment, when she was not sure whether he had flown from her. If he had been in the next room she might have had strength to flee; but not with this uncertainty and dread in her mind whether he had abandoned her. There

was but one thing in this tremendous emergency which she could do. Had she not promised to him to write to his mother? She would do this now.

CHAPTER XXII.

This period of early winter was a dull one at Oakley at all times. From October to Christmas it was not the custom of the family to invite the usual country-house array of defence against dulness. For some weeks after the partridge-shooting began there would be visitors about—luncheons at the coverside, dinners more or less sleepy, evenings more or less gay. And again at Christmas there was always a large party assembled; but between whiles the family were left to their own resources. How Sir John himself filled up his time was a profound and solemn mystery, which no one could entirely unravel. He spent it mostly in his library—in the perusal of Blue-books, in the writing of letters, and in something which was called business, and supposed to be the management of his estate; but everybody who knew Sir John knew that there was not very much beyond the most ceremonial portion of a sovereign's duty in his easy lot. The estate had been carefully managed all his life by the most careful and sensible of functionaries, Mr. Rolt, who was the son of the last agent, and the brother of the solicitor at Oakenden, who had the money matters of the family in his hands. And the family had been unexceptionable in its conduct for the last five-and-thirty years; there had been no extravagant heir, no heavy jointure diminishing its resources.

General Anthony, who had done very well for himself, was Sir John's only brother, the only other member of the family; and there had been nothing but unbroken respectability and discretion in the management of the finances of the house. The estate ran upon wheels, or upon velvet, and all but managed itself. Then as for Parliamentary business and the Blue-books, Sir John was a sound, reliable Conservative, who never dreamed of opening his mouth in the House. He voted as his leaders voted, who were the best able to judge; and the study of public affairs, to which he thus devoted himself, had all the merit of disinterestedness. It cannot even be said that it told greatly when he sat upon a Parliamentary committee, for he was apt to get confused on the points he knew best, and his knowledge did not stand him in stead at the moment it was wanted, as knowledge ought to do; but still, what with the Blue-books and the estate, he thought himself very fully occupied, and what could be desired more than this?

Two or three times in the day, especially when it rained, he would come into his wife's morning-room, and stand up with his back to the fire and talk, sometimes relevantly, sometimes irrelevantly, like most other people. But he was always serious, whether relevant or not. He had a long face, with gray whiskers and gray hair, and a long upper lip shutting close upon the under, which was feeble, though the chin too was rather long. His face in these wintry days, when there was no news of Arthur, was as serious as a countenance well could be. Whether he was talking of his son or not, Arthur was always more or less in Sir John's mind, and never smile, or glimmering of a smile, approached within a hundred miles of the serious lines of that long upper lip.

Lady Curtis was of a different disposition altogether. The last extremity of grief, even, could not produce in her the monotony of melancholy which was possible to her husband. She would weep as he never wept; but then she would laugh, also, in sheer impatience of the weight of tedium and sameness. Her suffering was far more acute than his steady dulness; but it was broken by gleams of activity, by sudden impulses, by perpetual changes. She flung herself into her housekeeping, stirring up all the quiet corners, and making a commotion in the servants' hall, such as for some time threatened the family peace—and into the parish, where Lucy did not always want her mother's assistance. She wrote letters to her friends, half cynical, half sorrowful, and more than half amusing, in which Arthur, indeed, was never referred to; but where many a cutting sentence, sharp jest, or mocking reflection betrayed that sting of personal suffering which those who knew her best could read between the lines. Lady Curtis was clever. She wrote articles now and then in literary papers, even sometimes in magazines; but this was an indulgence of which she was not proud, and she prudently kept silence about it; being wise enough to know that any such crown of wild olive sits badly upon the matronly brow of a country lady, alarming some people, and giving to others occasion for ill-natured gibes and pleasantry. Not her husband, certainly, and even not Lucy, knew always when she took upon herself the office of critic; and the able editor who printed her reviews was not aware what had made his contributor more industrious than usual and more bitter.

It was Arthur that pointed the clear steel of those polished little arrows which she discharged at the world. She did it as a relief to herself; but not that any one might know. And it must be added that there was a certain satisfaction in this safety-valve. Then there was crewel-work, and the patterns of the Art Needle-work Society, of which, however, she soon got tired. Altogether, Lady Curtis's activity was stimulated to its utmost. She had the happiness of discovering a source of waste in the house, and an abuse in the parish; and she fell upon a nest of foolish books to criticise, and began a series of papers upon "The Minor Morals of Society;" and she set vigorously to work upon a set of curtains in a bold and effective pattern of her own invention. And thus she beguiled away the weary days.

Lucy was less difficult, perhaps, than either her father or her mother. She was young, and it still seemed to her that in the course of nature everything that was amiss must come right, and every breach be mended. Sir John's opinion was that nothing would ever mend, and his wife's that the only thing to be done was to keep yourself busy, and persuade yourself that there was no hope nor expectation of any change within you.

But Lucy waited with as much patience as she could, crying sometimes over the estrangement of her brother, but with no despair in her: things would come right—nay, must come right—some time or other. To suppose that you could be

separated forever from any one who belonged to you, any one you loved! could there be folly in earth so great as that? It was a question of time, and the time was long and dreary, and hard to support; but yet, by-and-by, *of course* — who could doubt it?—everything would be well.

November and December are dreary months, let us make the best of them; and very dreary in the country, when the day is over by four o'clock or little after, and there are hours upon hours to be got through indoors, in a big, empty house, pervaded everywhere by that sense of the absent which is so much more urgent and all-prevailing than any presence. When Arthur had been at home, his being there was a matter of course, and no one thought much about it; but when Arthur was away! and away in this dismal manner, absorbed into another life, disjointed from theirs. Such an argument as this might make the dullest feel the superiority of an idea to all that is solid and practical.

In her own room, which Arthur rarely entered, Lucy missed her brother, and she missed him going about the parish, where he never went with her. And Sir John missed him in the midst of those Blue-books, at which the boy had made grimaces from a distance, but which he never approached; and Lady Curtis felt his absence when she wrote for her Review, though Arthur was the last person in the world to know anything of reviews. This is at once the desolation and the power of death, which fills our very atmosphere and daily breath with those whom it removes out of our sight forever; and this it was that gave force to the words which both father and mother said of Arthur when he forsook them. It was as if he had died.

The ladies of the family spent most of their time, as has been said, in the morning-room, with its two tall windows looking out from between the pillars of the façade. The drawing-room, which was large and splendid, too fine and too big to be cosy in, suffered in consequence, and, except when the house was very full, had much the air of an uninhabited place. The morning-room was fine enough, too fine most people thought nowadays. Lady Curtis was one of the people who most feel the influence of those successive waves of taste which sweep across the mind of the most cultivated portion of society from time to time.

Had it been necessary to refurnish this favorite room, she would have done it in the style of Queen Anne, with neutral tints and "flatted" color, tiled fireplaces and high mantel-tops; and she was by times a little uncomfortable about the florid effect of her Louis Quinze decoration; but there was no excuse for remodelling the pretty room which the children loved. It was florid, there could be no doubt. The cornice was rich with stucco wreaths, and there were Cupids about, and lyres, and knots of ribbon, and glowing garlands of flowers. The carpet was white Aubusson with a great bouquet in the centre, as flowery and brilliant as that which had made Nancy happy in Paris. Lady Curtis's writing-table was a *bonheur de jour* of the finest workmanship, and various articles of precious marquetry stood about, flowery and dainty. Two robust gilt Cupids supported the white marble of the mantel-piece, and the satin curtains were *looped and fringed, and festooned with* the most elaborate art. Lucy sat and knitted stockings for the village children upon a satin sofa, with her warm wool in the drawer of an inlaid table with curved legs, which was worth half as much as the village.

Everything in the room was framed on the principle of being beautiful; not for convenience or comfort, which is supposed to be the inspiration of various other styles of household decoration, but for beauty alone. And perhaps it was more suitable for the home of a bride, such as Lady Curtis had been when she collected all those pretty things about her, than for the centre of household life which it had become; though indeed it was very doubtful whether Lady Curtis, a clever, impatient-minded woman, had ever attained any ecstasy of happiness as the bride of good Sir John. She loved her dainty surroundings better now than she did when they were in all their freshness.

She was aware of her husband's steadfast goodness and truth, though he was not lively and amusing; and had more respect for him, and, at the same time, a tenderer sentiment for the father of her children, than, perhaps, she had entertained for the good, dull bridegroom to whom she had been bound, not entirely, report said, with her own free-will. Therefore, perhaps the beautiful room had never enshrined that impersonation of happiness, luxury, and splendor to whom all these decorations belonged by nature. Nowadays, certainly, it was not any luxurious leisure and blessedness that dwelt there; but care and doubt, such as would have been consistent with very sombre surroundings. Lucy sat and knitted, her mind wandering after Arthur, trying to imagine the brightest winter weather in Paris, and her brother enjoying himself, instead of the rainy skies here, the muddy roads, and gray miserable day. Lady Curtis was in her chair by the window for the sake of the light, busy with her crewels.

"They may say what they like about the higher art of these subdued tints," she said, "but nature is not subdued in her tints. How am I to do the autumn leaves in those tones of color? They are high and bright in nature." She said this, but she was thinking of Arthur all the time; and by-and-by Sir John came in from the library, and strolled up to the fire.

"Have not you had tea yet?" he said, putting himself in front, between the Cupids. "I thought you must be having tea. What a dreary afternoon it is! and the hounds are out. They must be having a disagreeable run." Thus he discoursed with his lips; but in his heart his thoughts were of Arthur too.

"Lucy has been in the village, though it has been so wet. She says there is a very sad commotion going on. Young Jack Hodge, the blacksmith's son— Tell your papa, Lucy," said Lady Curtis, with a sigh.

"I don't think it is so very bad," said Lucy, getting up to make the tea which had just been brought in; "and I am sure papa will not think so; but his mother is making a great fuss. She has got the Dissenting minister over from Oakenden to comfort her; and to hear him speak, you would think it was very bad indeed."

"What has happened?" said Sir John; "and why did not Bertie go?"

"Oh, Bertie, papa! what is the good of Ber-

tie? There is a look in his nose as if he smelt something disagreeable whenever he goes into one of the cottages. The people cannot put up with it, and why should they? I think the Dissenter was better, on the whole. Jack has gone for a soldier, that is all. I tried to say there was nothing so very dreadful in that; but they would not listen to me."

"That is all the fault of your Dissenters," said Sir John; "why shouldn't the lad go for a soldier? They would do away with poor people altogether, these Dissenters, if they could—and soldiers too, I suppose. They would leave us all defenceless, at the mercy of anybody that chooses to make a run at us. They never have anything themselves: I suppose that is the reason why."

"Well, that is not bad logic," said Lady Curtis. "I suppose they think those who have something to lose should defend themselves;" and she sighed again, thinking, where was the son of her own house, who was its natural defender? He was worse than Jack Hodge, who, at least, might be of use to his country, even if he did break his mother's heart.

"You mean the Volunteers?" said Sir John; "but I never believed in the Volunteers. It is all very well to let them amuse themselves soldiering. And, perhaps, in the country, where they would be officered by the gentlemen they know," he continued, after a moment's pause, with again Arthur, and not the Volunteers, in his thoughts, and echoing his wife's sigh, "they might be of some use; but I don't put any faith in them for the defence of the country. Thank you, my dear; on a wet afternoon like this one is glad of a cup of tea."

Sir John was generally glad of his cup of tea, if not for one reason, then for another—because it was wet, or because it was cold, or because it was sultry and stifling, or else for no reason at all: it formed a break in the long afternoon when there was nothing more interesting to do. For as he stood with his back to the fire, and his cup in his hand, he went on dully talking, as was his way.

"It is the very essence of democracy, you know—when you substitute what they call the citizen soldier, the man that is supposed to fight in his own defence, for the soldier that is paid for defending us—the very essence of democracy: it makes out that one man is just as good as another, and that the Hodges want as much taking care of as you and I."

"So they do, surely, papa," said Lucy; "their lives are as precious to them as ours are to us."

"You don't know anything about it, Lucy; they are not half so important to the country, and it's the country we ought to think of first," said Sir John. "Without an army, where should we be? The throne would have no authority. Volunteers mean democracy, my dear."

"And Jack Hodge is your true patriot," said his wife.

"Exactly so. I will tell his mother that is my opinion, the next time I am in the village. A foolish woman, with her Dissenters to put nonsense into her head! What could the boy do better? But Bertie ought to have been there. Bertie ought to have gone," said the baronet. "Below there are bad smells in the cottages, Lucy; but surely, if I can bear it, he ought to bear it; and you, you never say anything about the smells. I don't think Bertie can be doing his duty as a clergyman ought. The young men of the present day are beyond me?" Sir John added, with another sigh; and he put down his cup with a dreary shrug of his shoulders, and shook his gray head as he went slowly away.

How glad they all were when the long November day was over, and they could shut out the ceaseless drip-dripping of the rain, the sweep of the dead leaves across the windows! The autumn had been mild, and the foliage had lasted longer than usual. Now it came tumbling down with every breath, with every drop of rain, choking up the paths, and filling the air with the mournfullest downpouring of yellow. On such a day no one came up the avenue, unless it was a draggled villager bound for the servants' door, or the rector, or the doctor, neither of whom contributed much to the gratification of the house; and to look out upon the misty vista of the spectral trees, the damp rising from the ground and falling from the skies, both of which were about the same color, for even a short November day, is not cheerful to the spirits.

It was a relief when the house began to be dotted with lamps, when the shutters were closed and the curtains drawn. Lady Curtis, for some time, had not cared to have the shutters of her favorite room closed till bed-time. She did not give any reason for this fancy, but Sir John had found fault with it, and she had yielded. "It was not safe," he said, "to leave the lower windows open. Some one might get in and frighten the house, if no more." Lady Curtis had not stood out. She watched the servant close them with again a lingering sigh. She had meant nothing by having them open — no, nothing. Only, if such a thing might happen as that—any one—moved by some impulse of the heart, should suddenly come home—why, then there would be a little light visible from the very end of the avenue to encourage him. Nothing was more unlikely than that such a thing should happen; but still, granting that the impossible did sometimes come when no one expected it, then there might be use in the light. But as nobody could explain this, or say anything in defence of so painful a notion, of course it was done away when Sir John objected. My lady sat in the gilded chair, cushioned with satin, that stood by the fire, and took a last look of the dull twilight, with the trees looming through it like ghosts, as the footman began to shut up. It had been a dreary day; it was more agreeable to turn to the clear light of the lamp within, the subdued glimmer of the satin hangings, the sparkle of the fire. The day was done at last.

And yet it was a little dreary, also, to think of the hours that remained unaccomplished—the long, still evening in which there would be a little talk, very little, and the routine of dinner to go through, and the still evening after, which Lucy and she would spend together. Perhaps she would work, and Lucy read aloud; or Lucy would take to one of her many undertakings, which were of a homelier kind than Lady Curtis's crewels, while her mother wrote. The house was very still, as it became a great house to be, lying folded in the darkness, in the great park

in the humid lawn and clouds of watery trees, without one gleam from all the windows in front to welcome any one who, unexpected, might come out of the busy world to explore the stillness—the most unlikely thing in the world to happen; yet such things had been, and—who could tell?—might be.

There was one event still possible, and that was the coming-in of the post, which arrived after dinner, a most inappropriate moment, everybody said. Indeed, Sir John had often proposed not to send for the letters, but to leave them, when there were any, till next morning, rather than spoil the digestion of the family at such a moment. But Lady Curtis had a woman's liking for letters, and never would hear of this. She had no experience of the letters which spoil digestion. Her milliners' bills were no trouble to her. She had never been in debt, it is to be supposed, in her life, neither were there mysteries in her existence which she was afraid of: her letters were pleasant breaks upon the monotony, enriching the quiet of her country life; therefore she would have the post-bag brought up, whatever Sir John might say.

And that night there were two letters that seemed to wake up even in the house itself something like the heart-beating that flutters in an individual bosom at sight of a long-expected communication—two letters which bore the Paris post-mark; one to my lady, one to Sir John. The butler saw them at the first glance, recognizing the writing of one, guessing at the other. He whispered to the housekeeper, before he went to my lady's room with her share of the budget.

"Summat from Mr. Arthur," he whispered in her ear.

"Oh, let me look!" she said.

It was something to see even the outside of the letters; and they looked at each other across that other one, and agreed in their guess as to what it was. Daly, the butler, was a man of discrimination. He knew, as well as she did, that, whereas Sir John was equally dull at all times, my lady expected the post with a thrill of nervous anxiety every night. He knew it by her eyes, by the clutch of her hand at the letters, by the inspection, quick as lightning, which she gave them, always curbing her disappointment. This was why Daly carried my lady's letters the first, especially to-night.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"Lucy, Lucy!" said Lady Curtis, in a stifled voice.

It was the post-mark, the thin paper of the foreign letter, the stamp of the hotel, which had caught her eye; and it had not occurred to her, as she opened the envelope, that it was not Arthur's handwriting. Indeed, Nancy had been copying Arthur's handwriting, and had partially succeeded in making her own like his, at least for the length of the address. When she called to Lucy, it was that she had perceived the different writing, the unexpected form of address within, and had jumped at the conclusion that something had happened to Arthur, and that it was his servant who was writing. Lucy rushed *to her, seeing* her agitation, and coming behind *her, read over her shoulder the letter* which Lady Curtis threw an alarmed glance over, trembling in every limb. They trembled, both of them, with excitement as they went on. It was not what they expected; it was neither a letter from Arthur, nor yet an announcement of his illness, but something else, which they had not anticipated or thought of. It was the letter Nancy had written in hot haste and desperation, after the visit of Mrs. Curtis had come to so violent and sudden an end. My lady read it, the paper trembling in her hand, and Lucy read it over her shoulder, with painful, suppressed exclamations. This is what Nancy had said:

"My Lady,—Arthur says I am to write to you, though I do not know why; and I have told him I will, if I may say what I like and not show it to him. So you will know, if you are offended, that he has no hand in this. I am to say, I suppose, that I am sorry, though why I cannot tell. I did not think about you when I consented to marry Arthur. Why should I? In our class of life we don't think that a young man's mother has any right to interfere. I never thought of you, therefore I maintain I have nothing to be sorry for about you. I have enough to do to please my own father and mother; why should not he manage his as I did mine?

"And since we were married, what did I owe to you? You never did anything for me. You wrote to him, or you made Miss Lucy write to him, on our wedding-day, and never once named me. You knew I would be his wife before he got it, but you never named me. Was that a way to make me wish to please you? And the best I could do was never to think of you at all. Was not that as good as putting him against me, never to mention my name on my wedding-day? And why should I write to you now? You are old, and I am young. You ought to be the one to come and to say you are sorry. I am your son's wife; therefore, I am as good as you are, whatever I may have been before; and I was an honest girl before, and as good as anybody. Why didn't you come, then, and make up to *me*? It is old people who ought to show an example to the young, not young people to the old.

"Now that I have said this, I will just warn you that if you try to make Arthur think badly of me, to separate him from me (which you can't do, however you may try), that I will keep him separate from you. If you are fond of him, you will have to be civil to me, you and Miss Lucy, grand ladies though you are. You think me no better than the dirt below your feet; but if you do not treat me as I ought to be treated, I will keep Arthur from you, so that you shall never see him again. I have the power to do it—not like you, who have no power. He can do without his mother, but he can't do without me. I think it is honest to tell you this, because he insisted I was to write to you—I shouldn't have written to you of myself—and because I mean to come back home to England and settle at Underhayes, to be near my people, who have always been (not like you) kind to him as well as to me. So that now, my lady, you know exactly what I mean, you and Miss Lucy, and what I will do.

"Anna Frances Curtis."

Lady Curtis was flushed and agitated; her eyes blazed hotly over her crim[illegible] cheeks.

"Was ever any one so insolent?" she said, and bit her lip to keep from crying, altogether overwhelmed by the unexpected insult.

"Oh, mamma, the girl does not mean it!" cried Lucy, distressed, trying to take the letter. It was bad enough to read it once, but to read it, as she knew her mother would do, over and over again, feeling the enormity ever greater, would be terrible. Lucy put out her hand for it, to take it away.

"I will not give it you, Lucy. I know what you mean to do; to put it in the fire, that I may forget it, and think it is not half so bad."

"No, mamma; but why should you dwell upon it? She wrote it hastily. See, there is haste in every line; but we will read it at leisure, and go over it again and again. She is so uninstructed, so inexperienced; and there is a kind of savage justice in it, if you will but think, mamma."

"How dare you say so?" cried Lady Curtis, in whose mind the immediate pain and hurt received were too violent to be thus smoothed away, and who was as little able, for the moment, to inquire into the absolute justice of the matter as Nancy herself. The tears began to glisten in her eyes, tears of genuine suffering. "This is what our children bring us," she said; "they for whom we are ready to make any sacrifice—insult, the flaunting in our face of some poor creature, surely, surely not worth as much as his mother was to him, Lucy; not worth you—*you*, my child; of that I may be sure, at least; and his home, and all that was worth having in life—"

And some scalding drops fell on her hands in a hot and sudden shower. Tears do not last at Lady Curtis's age; they cost too much: only a sharp stab like this could bring them, hasty and unwilling, from her eyes.

"I know it is hard, very hard; but, mamma—"

Lucy was interrupted by the sound of her father's heavy step approaching the room. He threw the door open and came in hastily. He, too, had a letter in his hand, and held it out to his wife as he came forward.

"He has written at last," he said. "It is a fine thing to have waited so long for! Look, Elizabeth, if you can read it, what your boy says."

Lady Curtis took the letter, looking anxiously at her husband's face to read its effect. And then Lucy and she read it as they had read the other, the girl over her mother's shoulder. The very sight of Arthur's handwriting moved them. He had written a few words to Lucy to thank her for the money and the blessing conveyed to him on his wedding-day; but except these few warm words, they had not heard from him since that painful, violent letter which Lady Curtis had received after the visit of Mr. Rolt, the family lawyer, to Underhayes. And that had given the ladies so much pain that the very sight of the dear and familiar handwriting brought it back.

Sir John went to the fire, as was his way, and set himself up against the mantel-piece, turning towards them the dulness of his long melancholy countenance, which showed little change of expression one way or another. His heavy repose, not unclouded with trouble, contrasted sharply with the eager and anxious looks of his wife and daughter, already disturbed and excited. They read, breathless with anxiety and haste, flying over the paper, taking in its meaning almost at a glance in a way which was wonderful to him. He shook his head slightly as he saw this rapid process; it was impossible they could understand it, he said to himself; even Arthur's letter! skimmed over with feminine want of thoroughness in anything, as if it had been a book.

Arthur's letter, so far as external forms went, was dutiful enough:

"My dear Father,—You may think that I ought to say something about the long break in my letters, and I am aware that it would not be without reason; but what am I to say? My marriage was really a thing which concerned me most. I would have been ready to make any apologies for the indiscretions with which it was accompanied, and for the fundamental mistake of not having explained my wishes and intentions to you from the first. But that is too late now, and you must permit me to say that the strange step you yourself took in sending Rolt to Underhayes to interfere in my business justifies the silence in which I have taken refuge since, as being more respectful to you than anything I can say. I trust and desire to believe that the extraordinary proposals made by him did not emanate from you; nothing, indeed, but the mind of a pettifogging attorney could have suggested such means of endeavoring to outwit and frustrate an honorable attachment. I can never meet with civility the originator of these proposals, and it is a desire to say nothing on the subject which has kept me silent even to you.

"I now write about a serious matter which it is necessary to call your attention to. The allowance which was ample for me at Oxford, or when I was in another condition of life, is naturally quite inadequate to the expenses of a married man. My wife and I are about to return to England, and at her desire we will proceed at first to Underhayes, where her family reside. Our plans are not yet decided; but the first requisite for any arrangement is to know exactly by what degree you may be disposed to increase my income, in order that I may be able to provide for the increased expense to which I am now subject. We have been in Paris some weeks, and had it not been for the succor which my mother's generosity provided me, I do not see how I could have afforded to my wife all that it was indispensable my wife and Sir John Curtis's daughter-in-law should have. These of course are extraneous expenses; but I must request that you will kindly come to a decision about my present income with as little delay as possible. This is doubly important, as we shall thus only be able to make up our minds on what scale of living it will be proper for us to make our start.

"My wife desires her respects to my mother, Lucy, and yourself. Affectionately,

"Arthur Curtis."

"And this is all!" said Lady Curtis, throwing it on the table with a mixture of scorn and grief: "in so short a time how well she has tutored him! Oh, don't say anything, Lucy! I can see that girl's hand in every word; and this is all!"

"Surely it is all," said Sir John; "you don't think I would keep back anything—why should I? It's all, and enough too, I think. A fellow

like that, whom we've all petted and spoiled, thinking of nothing but his allowance! It's disappointing, that it certainly is. When one thinks that's Arthur!" said his father, his lower lip quivering with unusual emotion, yet something that was intended for a smile.

"Oh, don't make him out any worse than he is," said Lady Curtis. "I can see that girl's hand through all."

Now, a more gratuitous assertion than this could not be. Arthur had written when away from Nancy altogether, in the writing-room of the English Club. She had known nothing about what he was doing, and still less did she know that he had made up his mind not to struggle with his fate any longer, but to let her go back to her congenial soil, which would secure at least no further encounters with people of his own class, even when met in the recent accidental way. He could not, he felt, risk anything like this again—he had not strength for it. It was better to yield to her than to wear himself out with such paltry miseries; but up to this moment even Nancy herself did not know of his decision.

Lady Curtis, however, did not know this, nor did the despair in Arthur's mind ever occur to her, or the state of severance between him and his wife which had really existed when these two letters were written. It seemed to her that they were full of one spirit, and that Nancy had got the entire command, and put her own unregulated soul into her husband.

Dear as he was to his mother, the bold figure of this girl whom she had never seen seemed to rise up and obliterate her son before Lady Curtis's eyes—obliterate him intellectually and morally—so that all she saw was a shadow of Nancy, not the reality of Arthur. Sir John did not take this figurative view. He took what he saw for granted, exercising no spirit of divination. He was wounded, not to sharp pain, like his wife, but with a heavy sense of evil. This was all Arthur wanted—not to be his father's right-hand man, to help him (for, privately, Sir John was of opinion that he had a great deal to do), to become the real head of the estate, understanding everything as his father had wished, but only to have his allowance increased! That was all. It did not give Sir John a less pang in his matter-of-fact way than it did his wife, but this was the low level of interpretation by which he explained to himself the boy who had been his pride.

As for Lucy, she read the two letters with a double distress, as seeming to see something in both of them which escaped her parents. She thought it was because she was young, and in sympathy with these two foolish, erring, unkind, young people, that she was able to read between the lines, and see that they were not so unkind as they seemed. There was, as she had said, a kind of savage justice in Nancy's letter from Nancy's point of view; and insolent though it was, Lucy felt that she could understand it, and could excuse it though it was inexcusable. And as for Arthur's cold interestedness and apparent indifference to everything, was not this only a sign of mortal pain, a proof that he felt himself in a position from which he could not recede, *which he dared* not discuss or enter into? *"Oh," she cried, in the tumult of* feeling which rose within her, "do not take it all for granted, like this! Arthur is not what you think him, papa. He feels it, oh, I know he feels it to the bottom of his heart! But how can he discuss it, how can he open such a subject with us? She is his wife, and she knows what we think of her."

"Oh, Lucy, hold your peace!" cried Lady Curtis, whose heart was wrung to breaking. "What is the use of this casuistry, as if you knew him better than we do? No, I cannot shut my eyes to the truth, whatever you may do; this boy, for whom we have done so much, whom we have brought up so carefully, finds something more congenial in low society than in ours. It is unworthy of us to groan over such a preference. See, he avows it. He is going back to that wretched place, to the society of his wife's relations. We ought to be proud," said Lady Curtis, with her eyes flashing, with a miserable make-believe of a smile on her lips; "that is what he likes best—*my* boy!"

"Oh, mamma, don't be so hard upon him!"

"So hard—am I hard?—upon Arthur! God help me! I wish I could be a little harder; I wish I could think as little of him as he does of me or of what I feel!" cried Lady Curtis, with a moan in her broken voice. Sir John did not show so much emotion. He stood gazing dully before him, not even looking at them, his eyes fixed upon vacancy; but many thoughts were revolving dully in his oppressed spirit too.

"Now that he has written to me like this, he shall be attended to," said Sir John. "Since he wants nothing but money, he shall have his money, and I will wash my hands of him. People do not spend a great deal in that rank of life, do they? If that is how he is going to live, he must be provided for accordingly. I will speak to Rolt about it to-morrow. You see how he speaks of poor Rolt, a most meritorious man, that has no thought except our interest. And if it had not been that Arthur got hold of it before he ought to have known, Rolt would have bought the girl off and freed us. Ah, yes—Rolt is the best man of business, and the most considerate family friend, I know."

"But it was a dreadful thing to do; to buy her off—if you will think of it, papa, and think who she was—the girl whom Arthur *loved*. It does not matter," cried Lucy, with generous heat, "that we do not like her or approve of her. Arthur loved her; and this girl whom he loved so much, whom he thought more of than any one in the world, to be bought off!"

"Ay, that's it," said Sir John; "it would have all gone on smoothly if he had not broken in with his high-flown ideas just like you: the thing would have been done but for that, and he would have been clear of her. But now that it's come to this, he shall have what he wants, and he shall have what he's entitled to. I will see Rolt to-morrow," said Sir John, never changing the dull fixedness of his eyes.

And it may be supposed that the remainder of the evening was not very cheerful. Lady Curtis locked both the letters up in a drawer of her writing-table. "It is a pity they should be separated, these two," she said, with that quivering smile of scorn which is so bitter, more painful than weeping. Yes, this was what all their hopes had come to. Arthur, her boy, had cho-

sen his own path, and this was what it was—nothing in which his father or mother had any share. What he liked better was the coarse girl who had married him for all the advantages he brought in his hand, and who had infatuated him, and made him such a one as herself. The sense of failure was in Lady Curtis's mind, the pang of feeling that something inferior had been preferred to her, and to all that was worthy, by her boy.

Can anything be more terrible than when father or mother is driven to despise the child of their bosoms? It happens often enough, and there is no such pang on earth. With trembling hands and this miserable quiver of a smile on her lip, she locked them away. Now surely it was time that they should rouse themselves, shake off the dull misery for Arthur's loss which had paralyzed the house, and brood no more over the desertion of one so unworthy their love.

"We have enough of this," she said. "Come, Lucy. I do not mean that your life should be spent in sackcloth because Arthur is unworthy. Because he is hobnobbing with the tax-collector, are there to be no cakes and ale in Oakley? We will send our invitations to-morrow," she said, with a mocking little laugh of pain. Sir John opened his eyes a little at the levity of this unintelligible phrase about cakes and ale. But he had long ceased to criticise my lady, whatever she might do or say. She had odd ways of expressing herself sometimes, but she was always to be trusted in the main points.

"I shall speak to Rolt to-morrow," he said for his part, which was more reasonable, as he went back to his room and resumed his Blue-book. And he read till his usual hour, and lighted his candle exactly at the same moment as every other night, though his heart was heavy in his bosom, like a lump of lead, not warming his blood as it ought to do. The ladies were not so reasonable, I need not say. They sat over the fire till it died out between them, neither of them remarking the blackness, or being aware that the cold they felt had anything to do with the external circumstances—talking it over and over, arguing, fighting even: Lucy taking the side of defence, while her mother darted arrows of bitter words at Arthur and the girl who had got such empire over him.

Men do not make their miseries subjects of endless discussion like this, perhaps because two men are scarcely ever so much like the two halves of one soul as mother and daughter are; nor could any brother and father throw themselves wholly into such a question as the sister could do with the mother. Lucy fought for him, condemned him, justified him, all in a breath; and cried and struggled, and held up Arthur's standard even while she threw herself with passionate sympathy into the proud and sore disappointment of the mother whose hopes had been thus deceived. They were still there over the dead fire in full tide when the solemn little stroke of one startled them, and drove them to their rooms, chilled and miserable. How dark it was outside—the rain falling, the last leaves dropping, in the middle of the December night! It added a shivering of physical sympathy to eyes exhausted with crying, and voices exhausted with talking over this ever-expanding subject. Every thought and plan of the house had borne reference to Arthur for how many years; and this was how he dropped them, turned from them, threw himself upon the lower and baser elements of life.

CHAPTER XXIV.

According to Lady Curtis's hasty resolution, the invitations, to some, at least, of the ordinary Christmas party, were for an earlier date than usual. The climax of the distress produced by Arthur had come; and though the struggle was hard to pick up the ordinary occupations of life again, and go on as if nothing had happened, at a time when Arthur's absence was so doubly felt and apparent, the impatient soul of his mother was better able to bear this variety of pain than the monotonous heaviness of the other, the dull presence of one thought that had been upon the house like bonds of iron.

One of the first visitors who arrived was Durant, who had always been the first in Arthur's time, next to the son of the house, in familiarity and knowledge of everything and everybody about. Even during the miserable interval now passed, Durant's letters had given a certain solace to Lady Curtis, as furnishing her always with something to talk of, something to discuss with Lucy, to whom she would point out freely the weakness of his arguments, which were always in Arthur's favor, and for which Arthur's mother loved him, even while she took a delight in demonstrating their futility.

Lucy had a long round to make among her poor people on the afternoon on which Durant was expected. She could not have told why it was that she chose that special day: perhaps because it was fine—a simple reason, quite satisfactory to the ordinary intelligence; perhaps because the association of ideas with him, whom she had not seen since he took her to Arthur's wedding, was so painful that she was willing to postpone the meeting as long as possible; or perhaps she was desirous in Arthur's interest that Lady Curtis should have her first conversation with his faithful friend undisturbed by any third person; or, perhaps, again, Lucy had reasons of her own, into which none of us have any right to pry. She was for a long time at the almshouses, having started early to take advantage of the brightest part of the short winter day, and took her luncheon with Mrs. Rolt, the wife of the good agent, to whom the children at Oakley had been as her own since ever they were born.

Mrs. Rolt had no children of her own, and she had as great a desire to talk about Arthur as his mother herself had. She plunged into the subject as soon as Lucy appeared, and there was nothing but sympathy and tenderness in the bosom of this simple-hearted retainer of the family, who was at the same time a far-away cousin, and therefore on more familiar terms than are usually permitted to an agent's wife. This visit detained Lucy also, so that it was four o'clock, and the red winter sunset just over, when she started to walk up the long avenue. Durant had been expected by an earlier train at the station, which was a mile or two off, so that Lucy felt herself safe. She set out upon her walk very full of a new incident which she had not pre-

viously heard of—the meeting between her aunt and her brother at Paris, of which Mrs. Rolt had been informed by the rector. "Why did not he tell us, or why did not Aunt Anthony write?" Lucy had said.

"Oh, my pet, what could she write? I don't suppose it was pleasant," Mrs. Rolt said: "however angry you may be with your own, you don't like to hear them blamed by others; and Mrs. Anthony has sense enough to know that."

"Then why did she mention it at all?" said Lucy.

"Oh, my love, that would have been more than flesh and blood is equal to. To have had an adventure like that, and not to have mentioned it at all! She said Mrs. Arthur behaved *dreadfully* to her, abused her, turned her out of her rooms. But we must take all that with a great many grains of salt, for you know your Aunt Anthony, my dear."

"Yes, I know Aunt Anthony. But how dreadful it is that Arthur's wife—fancy, *Arthur's wife!* —should give any one occasion to say that she behaved badly. You will not tell mamma?"

"No, indeed, I promise you; and I dare say, if we could know it all, the half isn't true. You mustn't worry about it, my darling," said Mrs. Rolt, kissing Lucy as she went away.

The girl shook her head. Why should they tell her such things if they meant her not to worry? And yet she was feverishly glad that she had been told, as people are in respect to every such family misery. She went in at the great gates, with her cheek still flushed by the agitation of the news. To hear that a friend, a member of the family, had actually met and spoken with Nancy, seemed to bring her nearer, to make her more real. And perhaps there was a personal advantage in this thrill of renewed agitation about Arthur, which replaced for the moment some of her own thoughts. For lo! it so occurred that all Lucy's precautions had been futile. She had not walked half a dozen yards when she heard behind her the rattle of the dog-cart swinging round the corner to the gate, that had been sent for Durant to the station; and before she had time to collect her thoughts, it drew up suddenly just behind her, and Durant himself sprung out of it, and in a moment was at her side. The dog-cart went on with his portmanteau, and she felt herself exactly in the circumstances she had so elaborately avoided—bound, without chance of escape, to a long solitary walk through the still avenue, and a long confidential talk before he had seen any one else, with her brother's friend.

"Yes, the train was late; there was some slight accident on the line, at which I have been fuming and fretting. But, as it happens, it has been a lucky detention," said Durant.

Lucy took no notice, not even so much as by a smile.

"You said you were very busy."

"Yes, I am getting plenty of work to do; not very distinguished work as yet, but I hope better may come."

"Your leading counsel will fall ill some day, and it will be a very interesting, romantic case, and you will be inspired to make the most eloquent speech, and your fortune will be made."

"I see you know how such things happen," *he said, with a laugh.*

"Oh yes, I have read a great many novels," said Lucy. "That is always how young barristers get on; and between that and the wool-sack is but a step."

"A very long stride, I fear; but I do not insist on the wool-sack," said Durant. And then there was a pause, and he said, lower, "I saw Arthur a few days ago."

"Did you see him? Oh, Mr. Durant, you must not mind what mamma says. She has begun to jeer at him, and that is the worst of all. How was he looking? Poor Arthur, poor boy! And his wife—did you see her? Oh, I have been hearing such a story of her!"

"What story?" he asked, anxiously.

He had heard many; but, on the whole, he was no enemy to Nancy. He saw the glimmer of tears in Lucy's eyes, and this did much to steel his heart against Arthur's wife; but still he had no feeling against Nancy. He was ready, even, more or less, to stand up in her defence.

"My aunt, it appears, saw her in Paris, Mr. Durant."

"Oh, it is Mrs. Curtis's story, then?" he said.

"You speak as if there were a great many stories about her," said Lucy, with sudden heat.

"No; but one hears everything, you know, in town—especially, I think, at this time of the year, when there are few men about, and they talk of everything."

"Yes," said Lucy. "I have heard often of the gossip in your clubs—that it is worse and more unkind than any other gossip."

"Do not be too hard upon us! It is as petty and miserable as gossip is everywhere. But I have seen Mrs. Curtis, and heard it from herself. It is nothing, a misunderstanding between women—"

"Which, of course, you consider the merest trifle," cried Lucy, much more piqued by this countershot than he had been by the assault on the clubs. Women are certainly on this point more ready to take offence than men, who have the calm confidence of their own superiority to fall back upon.

"I do not, indeed; but the women in question are not of the highest order. Mrs. Curtis, most likely, was fussy and interfering; and Nancy—"

"Do you call her Nancy?" cried Lucy, opening wide eyes.

"I beg your pardon. I got used to the name before she was Mrs. Arthur; and there is such a wonderful incongruity in the idea that she is Mrs. Arthur," he said, doing his best to conciliate by this remark; but this slip of the name had evidently had a bad effect, he could not tell why. He thought that Lucy (in whom he had never before seen any indication of such foolish family pride) was offended by such a familiarity; and yet what could he say to excuse it? "Mrs. Curtis was intrusive, probably," he went on, "and Mrs. Arthur resented it."

"Oh, do not change the name you are accustomed to for me, Mr. Durant!"

"I am not accustomed to it," he answered, meekly, feeling that something was wrong, but not knowing what it was. "She resented it, I suppose. I do not wish to be disagreeable, but you know that a lady like Mrs. Curtis can be very officious and interfering; and *she* resented it, I suppose."

Poor Durant! if he thought he was mending

matters by calling Arthur's wife *she* with that little emphasis, how mistaken he was! Lucy's heart was conscious of a thrill and jar, such as one's foot or hand might experience if suddenly striking against some sharp angle in the dark. She had no right to feel so unreasonably offended with Durant, so unreasonably disdainful of Arthur's wife. Lucy was angry with herself for the force of her sentiments, which seemed so utterly out of proportion with the matter on hand. She thought it more dignified and befitting to retire from any further question of it. But her aspect changed unawares, her very form grew stiffer and more erect, and she said, icily,

"You said you saw Arthur. Is he looking better than when we saw him last?"

"No," said Durant, hesitating; "I am not able to say that he is. I hope Lady Curtis will not ask me that question."

"Oh!" said Lucy, the tears springing to her eyes, "do you think I am not as anxious about my only brother, as concerned, as mamma?"

"Indeed I do not mean anything of the kind; but I can speak to you more freely. *You* understand; you always did understand, Miss Curtis," he said, looking at her with a tender admiration which stole the hardness from Lucy's heart in spite of herself. "I do not know how it was. It is so natural that Lady Curtis—that all his family should see the folly and the unkindness of it most. But you always saw the whole—and understood."

"I never excused Arthur, Mr. Durant. No one could know the evil of what he has done—the pain it has produced—so well as I."

"I know," he said, softly, "all the more honor to your delicate heart that understood—I beg your pardon, I was only speaking by way of explanation. I can speak to you as I cannot speak—to any one else. Arthur is not looking well, poor fellow—he is harassed and worried to death. All the glamour has gone out of his eyes, and he sees his wife's family now as other people see them, as very commonplace, sordid, uneducated people, with whom, or with their like, he has no affinity. I would not say even that he did not see this more deeply than—I do, for instance, who am quite indifferent. To me they seem good sort of people enough—in their way. But Arthur has the horror of feeling that they belong to him more or less; and that he is called upon to associate with them."

"Poor boy! oh, poor boy! And he was always so fastidious! But that is nothing, Mr. Durant; they do *not* belong to him. He can shake them off whenever he likes; but her—what of her? She is the chief person to be thought of," said Lucy, with a sigh that it should be so.

"This is precisely the thing which I can say to you, and to no other," said Durant. "She is not the same as they are. If you could fancy one of the stories of a stolen child—that was always different, always superior to the children of the people who brought it up—"

"Superior—Aunt Anthony's story does not sound much like superiority! I think you are influenced, as they say gentlemen always are, by her good looks, and that is why you make an exception in favor of—my sister-in-law," said Lucy, with a sound in those words such as Durant had never heard before from her lips. He looked at her in the growing twilight with wonder and pain. Was his certainty of *her* superiority to every other person concerned, about to turn out vain? It was almost dark, and he could not make out the expression of Lucy's face; and of all things in the world, the last that could have occurred to the young man was anything to account for this, which should have been flattering to himself.

When he spoke again, there was some distress in his voice, and a half tone of complaint. "I thought I might venture on saying this to *you*—I thought you would understand; the facts are all against her. I believe she has managed very badly; and allowed everybody to see her want of cultivation, her strange—ignorance. Nevertheless," he said, earnestly, "I do not despair of Nancy. As for her good looks, they count for very little with me. What effect they may have on idle and unoccupied minds, I cannot pretend to say; but for a man like myself, with a busy life and a preoccupied imagination—"

"Oh, I beg your pardon, Mr. Durant," cried Lucy, "I did not wish to pry into your secrets."

She would not have said it had she taken time to think. What folly, to let him know that she understood that enigmatical phrase about the preoccupied imagination! Lucy went on, quickening her pace, feeling the glow of a sudden blush run all over her in the gathering dark. And the silence seemed to thrill about them with all manner of possibilities of what might be said next. They were as much alone as if they had been in a desert island—bare trees standing closely about, the twilight all gray among the branches, the whole world still and listening. The thrill came to Lucy too, a kind of visionary tremor.

"Mamma will be looking out for you," she said, hurriedly. "She will scold me for keeping you so long walking, when you might have been there in the dog-cart half an hour ago;" and she sensibly quickened her own pace.

But Durant did not share in that thrill. It affected him only with a contrary touch of despondency. Lucy's fright lest he should go on to tell her who it was who had preoccupied his imagination (could she entertain any doubt who it was?) reflected itself in his melancholy sense that he dared not tell her any more. He dared not because he was poor—he who, even if he had been rich, would not have been thought her equal by any one belonging to her; and because he was her father's guest, and incapable of betraying his hospitality by a word to his daughter which Sir John would not have permitted. Thus that suggestion of self-disclosure ended in a blank silence which neither would break. He, too, quickened his steps to keep up with her, and in a few minutes they reached the house, which rayed out light into the darkness from the open door and windows. It seemed all bright, all open, full of hospitable warmth and radiance.

When Durant had come here before, he had come with Arthur, and there had been a rush of mother and sister to the door to meet the heir of everything, the first thought and hope of all within these walls. Durant had been half saddened many a time by that warm and exuberant welcome which Arthur always received. He himself had been received kindly too, but with what a difference! And as there was no particular enthusiasm about him in his own home, not-

withstanding the fact that his family were indebted to him for everything, he had never been able to divest himself of a certain envy for Arthur. But he was a thousand times more saddened now to go up the great steps into the hall, and see no mother hurrying out to receive her son, no Arthur coming with cheerful outcry, nothing but himself stealing in softly, half ashamed of being there without Arthur, half afraid to look at Lucy, who must feel it too, he felt. He did not know how to go on and meet Lady Curtis's eyes. He felt sure they must meet him with a reproach. "Where is Arthur?" he felt the very house say to him; and almost wished that he had been guilty, that he could have taken their reproaches to himself, and answered for his friend's sake, "It is my fault." He paused in the hall, and looked round wistfully at Lucy. Her eyes were wet, her lips faltering. She held out that hand to him.

"I know," she said; "but when we have got over the first, it will be almost as if he had come too."

"Almost!" he said, shaking his head. He felt his eyes grow wet, and held her hand almost without knowing that he held it. Lady Curtis had heard the movement in the hall, though she had been trying not to hear it, and the shock had been broken to her by the arrival of the dog-cart, which she thought was bringing him. She came out now, hiding her agitation with a smile, and held out her hands. Neither of them could speak. But when they got into that room which had seen so many happy meetings, it was too much for Arthur's mother. She took hold of his arm convulsively with both her hands, and leaned her weight upon his shoulder, and cried, "Oh, my boy!" through the sobs which she could not suppress. Durant was overcome at once by the emotion and the confidence. He stooped down with tender reverence and kissed her cheek.

"He is all the brother I have ever known," he said.

"Yes, Lewis, yes, I know. God bless you! you have always been on Arthur's side."

Lucy stood by with strange currents of thought going through her mind, dimly understanding the man who was not her lover, but whose imagination was preoccupied past being touched by any one else; yet tempted grievously to misunderstand him, and wondering, with a latent pain just ready to come into being, whether this was one of the common mockeries of fate which made her mother receive him thus almost as a son, at the very time when he had ceased to entertain that sentiment which might have made a true son of him?

Strange are the vagaries of young minds at this doubtful period, when everything is undisclosed and uncertain. She had entertained no doubt as to who it was who occupied his imagination when he had said those words. Did she really entertain a doubt now? or was she fostering such a thing into being—trying to make herself believe it? It would be hard to say. She stood by wondering, feeling in herself all the germs of doubt, and that inclination to nurse and develop them, and make herself unhappy, which most of us have felt; all this, however, tempered by a curious thrill of pleasure to hear *what Lady Curtis said. Lewis!* They had called him Lewis Durant among themselves for years, as (she felt no doubt) he had called her Lucy; but the name had never been employed before by any one but Arthur. This was a leap unspeakable in intimacy. Lady Curtis had adopted him, so to speak, by thus involuntarily casting herself upon him, and the sudden use of his name. But what did *he* think? Was it Arthur only that was in his mind?

Lucy drew her mother's chair to the fire, and pulled off her own thick out-door jacket. There was tea on the table ready to be poured out, and the soft lamplight and warm glow of the fire brought out all the prettiness of the room, with its gay tints and gleams of gold. What had trouble to do in that cheerful place, amidst those artificial graces which had become natural and kindly by use and wont? The stir of her daughter's movements brought Lady Curtis to herself. They sat down round the fire as if the new-comer had been another son, and talked of Arthur. It was almost as endless, almost as engrossing a talk as when the mother and sister sat alone together, and felt as if they could never cease. But by-and-by Sir John came in for his cup of tea, and asked how it was the train was so late, and all the particulars of the journey. Sir John himself had delayed half an hour beyond his usual time in coming for his tea. He had felt Durant's arrival too.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE next day the ordinary guests began to arrive at Oakley. They were not of a very lively character. With an instinctive sense of the difference, which the family were scarcely conscious of, changes had been made in the list of visitors which would have been got together in Arthur's time. Scarcely any young men were of the party. When there is not a young man in the house, what use in asking young men? unless it had been in a matrimonial point of view, for Lucy's sake, an idea which not only Lucy, but her mother, regarded (in the latter case injudiciously, it ought to be said) with scorn. Sir John had given up hunting long ago; and if he made a serious shot once or twice in a season, it was more upon the principle which makes an old king open a ball than any more active personal liking for the sport.

The party accordingly consisted in great part of his contemporaries, some in Parliament, some in the law, chiefly belonging to the learned professions. There was a judge, and there was the head of a college, and for a few days there was a bishop; but as this latter functionary was the most sportive member of the party, he could not be counted as adding to its solemnity; and these magnates of course did not stay long. And then there was the master of the hounds, who was more solemn; and there were the wives of these gentlemen, and in some cases their daughters, and a stray man or two of the order of those who know everybody and have been everywhere, and have done a little of everything, without getting more than a general reputation for themselves, and without giving any very clear indications to the world where they sprung from or to whom they belonged. There were also a few

ladies of the same species, but whose families and antecedents were unimpeachable. It was Lady Curtis, who abhorred dulness, who had added these. Sir John liked the dulness, and did not object to having a lady next to him who dined well and said little.

In spite of Lady Curtis's efforts, however, the party was dull. It was perhaps too elderly and too serious. Well-conducted married people are dull in society. They are not sufficiently interested in each other to exert themselves for each other's amusement, and there can be little doubt that as a source of diversion and interest to their fellow-creatures, a couple of naughty persons bent on flirtation and ill-behavior make a better recompense to their entertainers. This element was sadly wanting at Oakley; there was no little drama to watch, legitimate genteel comedy ripening towards marriage and all the domestic joys, or more reprehensible episode tending the other way, such as often proves more exciting still to the jaded appetite of society. And it can scarcely be wondered at if, in the absence of other fun, this respectable assembly threw itself on the affairs of the family.

There was a great deal of conversation in corners about Arthur's marriage. The Bates family were too low down in the world to have even reached the level of gossip, and except that he had made a very foolish marriage—a *mésalliance* in every sense of the word—no one knew anything further, except one lady who was acquainted with Mrs. Anthony Curtis, and had received from her a vague account of her meeting with Nancy. This lady had formed an idea, quite erroneous, as it happened, yet an idea, of Arthur's wife, which was a point not attained to by anybody else in the house. She thought (as seemed so natural) that Nancy must have been an actress in a minor theatre, a nameless *figurante*, one of the class who are supposed to inthrall well-born young men, and who, wonder of wonders! do so to the everlasting astonishment of the world, notwithstanding all its theories on the subject. But it did not enter into anybody's mind to suppose that the girl whom Arthur had married had not the advantage of being wicked and shameless. The lady who knew the story whispered it to others when none of the family were present. "Turned her out of her rooms, I assure you, my dear," she said. "They were in the best rooms of a most expensive hotel, I need not say. Such people never spare any expense."

"A girl from a theatre! But what theatre? There are such differences; that means anything, from a lady to a dressing-girl."

"She was not a lady, at least; that is the only one thing that is certain. She was a—" Here the teller of the tale stopped abruptly, adding, in a louder tone, "I know only one lady on the stage, but she is enough to justify any amount of raving. Mrs. Kenworthy—don't you know?—you must have seen her."

It need not be added that it was one of Lady Curtis's friends, a middle-aged person who knew everybody, who spoke, and that the sudden break was owing to the entrance of Lucy, who came in unsuspicious, and caught them in the middle of their talk.

"Oh yes, I have seen her," said another, faltering, while the other members of the party broke up suspiciously, and began to talk to each other with great earnestness. Lucy had thought no evil when she came in, to see all the heads together, but this breaking-up and evident desire to conceal the subject of discussion roused her. These were the sort of conversations that went on through the hospitable house. When Sir John was alone for a few minutes with the judge, who had been the friend of his youth, that learned functionary took him by the button-hole, and said, "What's this, what's this, Curtis, I hear about your son?" They talked of it under Lady Curtis's eye in the drawing-room as they sipped their tea. Poor Arthur had been cast off by his family, they said; he must have been living a bad life before, or he could never have been thrown in the way of such a person, and never could have married her. *Had* he married her? that was the next question. Or was it not altogether disreputable, the connection itself and everything about it?

So they talked; and Lucy for once got to feel it in the air, and to lose her temper sometimes at the sense of this strange mass of secret criticism of which her family was the object. She made an assault upon her cousin, the rector, in the midst of it with nervous vehemence. He had been talking to Miss Wilton, the lady who had rushed into a description of Mrs. Kenworthy, when Lucy came into the room that morning and interrupted more important talk. Lucy, watching, had perceived that Bertie had held back while the other had been pressing questions upon him, and that after the interview Miss Wilton had hurried to a pair of expecting friends, and communicated to them the information which she had acquired. Miss Curtis called her cousin to her with a somewhat imperious gesture, a gesture, however, which he was very willing to obey.

Hubert Curtis had not found himself, so far, any the better for the misfortune which had happened to Arthur. He was not taken more into favor at the Hall, nor did Lucy incline more to his society than when her brother was at Oakley. He had not gained any ground. However likely it might be that she would have a larger portion of the family goods, Bertie saw no probability that the advantage would in any way come to himself; he had almost, he thought, lost instead of gaining by Arthur's absence.

When Arthur was at home, he, as the nearest neighbor, the only man of anything near his own age close at hand, had a natural place at Oakley besides that derived from his relationship. But now what had he to do at the Hall? Lucy did not encourage him, certainly, in any devotion to her. Lady Curtis had an instinctive, half-jealous dislike to him, as she would have had, probably, to any young man whose sensible and correct behavior was a standing reproach to Arthur. And Sir John could not be troubled by Bertie's peace-making and desire to persuade him that all would eventually be well. Therefore he had suffered with Arthur, which was a thing he did not calculate upon; and it would be impossible to deny that his mother's story about Arthur's wife had given him a kind of grim satisfaction. If he were not bettered, at least others were the worse. He said, "Poor Arthur!" with contemptuous content. If a man chose to make a fool of himself like that, it was only right that he should pay the penalty; and he had been unable to refrain from repeating it

mother's story to Mrs. Rolt, who was shocked and grieved, as Bertie, too, assumed to be. But he had not been guilty of the treachery of discussing it at the Hall. When Miss Wilton spoke to him, he had no desire to give her any further information, but answered as sparingly as possible. Of course it was now, when he really had been exercising a certain amount of virtue, that his punishment came.

"Bertie," said Lucy, as he came up to her, "I want to know why my aunt goes on spreading that story, and why you talk it over with everybody except mamma and me?"

"What story?" But he did not attempt to deceive her further by pretending that he did not know.

"We were the most interested," said Lucy. "If you had told us, it would have been natural, and perhaps kind; but why do you tell it to other people? What good could that do?"

"What other people have I told it to?" he said. "I was questioned over there, but I made no reply, or at least as little as I could. I told Mrs. Rolt, and I beg your pardon for that. She was so anxious to know something, and I knew she was to be trusted. Don't blame me, Lucy; I have not intended to be hard upon Arthur."

"Hard upon Arthur! I did not suppose so; he can fight his own battles," said Lucy, raising her head with a look which was almost haughty. "But you are unkind to us. You are my cousin, our nearest relation, Bertie. You should not go about telling disagreeable stories. And then you are a—"

"Go on," he said; "recall me to my duties. I am a clergyman—was not that what you were about to say?—and I ought not to be a gossip, going from house to house. I will not attempt to defend myself, Lucy. If that is my character, it is better I should say nothing; and certainly, if you think so, I cannot undertake to undeceive you. It is you who are unkind to me."

"I don't think so. I did not mean to say so much as that," said Lucy, abashed. "But oh, Bertie, why should you treat *us* so? Are not we, is not Arthur, your own flesh and blood?"

"I am but too ready to acknowledge it, too glad to think of it," he said, with a sudden smile.

And as Lucy had no difficulty in looking at him, no shyness about meeting his eyes, she could not help seeing the eagerness in them, and softening of unmistakable sentiment. Altogether, apart from the fact that she would be very well off and an excellent match, he liked her as sincerely as was in him. Love, perhaps, is too strong a word; but he liked her well enough to have wanted to marry her if she had only possessed a competence and nothing more, if she had not been in any exceptional position as the only obedient and dutiful child of the house. Whether his sentiment was of a robust enough kind to have made him seek Lucy had she been poor, is a different question; but it might even have been strong enough for this, perhaps, for all any one could say.

She was softened, too. Lucy was not one of those *farouche* young women who resent being loved. She was sorry that any such mistaken feeling should be in his mind, if it was in his mind; but, all the same, she was rather softened *than hardened by the look of eager* conciliatoriness *and desire to please her which* was in his face.

"Aunt Anthony might have told us herself. She need not have let other people know," she said, shifting her ground, and in a gentler tone.

But here he had a very good answer provided.

"My mother is not here," he said, quite gently, without a tinge of reproach. "She cannot either explain or defend herself."

What could Lucy say? She blushed crimson, deeply moved by the sting of this retort courteous.

"I wished her to be here," she said.

"You always wish what is kind. I did not think it was you; but, Lucy, don't you see—"

At this moment Sir John came up, placing himself so that the conversation was interrupted. As the mantel-piece was not near enough to be leaned upon, he leaned upon one of the marble consoles behind which a big glass rose to the ceiling, reflecting his figure and the faces of the two in front of him.

"I have often noticed," he said, "that when we have a mild rainy November, the cold is bitter in spring. Have you remarked that, Bertie? But, to be sure, you are not a country bird, you don't know much about the weather; but you will learn—you will learn before you are my age."

"It seems a simple enough conclusion, and I don't mind accepting it as part of my creed," said the rector, with a laugh, in which, however, there was some surprise mixed, for he did not understand what motive his uncle could have in placing himself there to make this very unimportant remark.

"They tell me the meet is to be here to-morrow," said Sir John; "and some of the ladies are going to ride. I am very glad Lucy doesn't hunt. You had better come up and make yourself useful, Bertie, now that there's nobody in the house. I suppose you don't ride now to speak of? Of course, there's Durant; I don't know what his fancy is. I never was a cross-country man myself. I was always fond of more serious pursuits. Your father, now, my brother Tony, he was always fond of it—a sort of practical fellow. As for me, I always took a pleasure in more serious things."

"You were born for Parliament, sir," said the rector, half with veiled satire, half with a disposition to please his uncle, who had been kind enough, and from whom more kindness yet might come.

"Well, yes, perhaps you are right," said Sir John; "that was more in my way; I always took an interest in public business. When I was a boy at Eton I used to read the debates as regularly as I do now—and I have never changed my principles or turned my coat, Bertie. That is something to say after thirty years of public life. I have never seen reason to modify my opinions, as so many people do. One set of principles has been enough to guide me through life, and I cannot believe that any man wants more."

"It is a very happy state of mind, sir," said the rector, wondering more and more why his uncle had elected him to hear the characteristics of his wisdom. Lucy had cleverly stolen away to do her duty by the other guests, and only Lady Curtis was aware of her husband's real meaning. She smiled within herself at his simple device to separate Lucy from a man who

might put in the pretensions of a lover. But when Lucy, after stealing away from her cousin's side, was to be seen a little while after at Durant's, then it was Lady Curtis's turn to look serious, and she herself moved from her own chair, when she saw them talking, with a lively sense of the same need for interference which had moved her husband. When Lady Curtis joined them their conversation was simple enough, nothing to alarm any parent; but yet she remained there, talking with something of her old brightness, until Lucy had left that end of the room, too, in turn, and had gone to carry consolation to old Mrs. Nuttenden in the corner, who was slightly deaf, and not amusing, with her efforts to amuse whom nobody interfered.

Durant did not notice the gentle interference in the rector's case, but he felt it very distinctly in his own; and with a little pang said to himself that he would give no occasion for this watchfulness, but would shorten his proposed stay, as he had already intended to do. This was not because there was any failure of the kindness, even the affection, with which he had been first received. Lady Curtis talked to him as she did to nobody else but Lucy, confided in him—called him Lewis, as she had done when he arrived, and discussed her son with him with family freedom and trust, in a manner, indeed, which would have filled many young men with fond imaginations and made them feel themselves almost wooed.

And Sir John was quite kind, though in a different way. He had always been slightly suspicious of Durant as one of those clever men who are never quite safe, and of whom you cannot be too sure what levelling and atheistical sentiments may accompany their intellectual gifts. One of my lady's sort of people, Sir John had always considered him, not a retainer of his own, but on the other side; yet because he was so associated with Arthur, Sir John's heart had melted to him also. So that it was no failure of the most cordial welcome which made Durant feel it better to hasten away. He went to his room that night quite decided by the manner of the woman who called him by his Christian name, and looked at him with such motherly affection in her eyes. Was it Lady Curtis's fault? He did not blame her. He said to himself that, had Lucy been his own sister, he would not have given her to a poor barrister without family, without connections, with burdens of his own upon his shoulders, and no honors to bestow. Why should he linger there?

Now that Arthur was so far off from Oakley; now, above all, that Arthur was *married*—the most complete of severing influences—it was inevitable, he said, that his connection with Oakley must gradually drop off. They would not mean it, they would not wish it, yet it would come to pass. And why should he seek to prevent it? Was there not between them a great gulf fixed?—that gulf which wealth might fill up, perhaps, which his old grandfather's money might have thrown a golden bridge across had it still existed, but which now gaped like the bottomless pit, and could never be crossed by any skill or effort of his. Should he stay only to impress this more and more upon himself? He made up his mind that very night.

But that did not hinder him on the next day after these events, which was Sunday, from finding himself by Lucy's side in one of the quiet moments of that quiet day. He was going off the next morning, and it chanced to him, unawares, to come into the Louis Quinze room in the interval between church and luncheon, which is a moment of general dispersion in which no one knows where any one is. Lucy was in the morning-room writing a letter, when Durant came in. He was very self-denying, yet when she stopped and laid down her pen, and said, "Come in; don't go away!" he could not resist the invitation. He came in and stood near her, leaning upon the corner of the mantel-shelf close to one of those big rococo Cupids between whom Sir John was so fond of placing himself. And Lucy was a little eager, almost agitated, more resolute to talk to him than he was to talk to her. She said, without any preface, "Are you really going away to-morrow? I was surprised; and I don't seem to have seen you at all, or to have said half I had to say."

"I must go," he said, with a sigh, "for many reasons; and chiefly because—"

"Because what? You do not think there is any change, Mr. Durant? You must not think there is any change: there is no one mamma trusts in so entirely as in you."

"I am very glad to think so," he said, "and to believe that she would trust me if anything occurred—if I was wanted." Here he made a pause, and added, in a low tone, "and you too?"

"And I too! can you doubt it? I know," said Lucy, faltering, "that Arthur has no such true friend."

He made a little unconscious gesture with his hand. She knew exactly what it meant. It meant Arthur, always Arthur! never anything on his own account; always for the use that might be made of him. But this would have been very unreasonable had he put it into words, for it was precisely on this reason that he had claimed to be trusted, "if anything occurred—if he was wanted." Very unreasonable and inconsistent; but, then, men are so.

And what could she say? She could not take the initiative, and tell him that her interest in him, at least, was not all on account of Arthur. She made a tremulous pause, and then said, "Everything is so different this year. We have done nothing but talk to you of Arthur. The time seems gone in which we used to talk so freely—of us all."

"Yes," he said, "it is kind, very kind of you to use such words. What talks we have had here of—us all, before we had begun to feel the differences between us!"

"What differences?" she said, eagerly. "Mr. Durant, I hope you are too generous to think that any outside differences—" Poor Lucy colored, and grew so eager that her earnestness defeated its object, and she could not get the words out.

"Not that," he said, "not the loss of our money. I know no one here would think the less of me for that—perhaps the better," he added, with a smile, "as being just a poor man now, without any pretence of equality on account of wealth. I did not mean that; but rather the enlightenment that comes with years, and that shows to me how little I, being what I am, ever could be on the same footing with you."

"Mr. Durant, you are unkind—you *are* ungenerous!"

"Not so—not so; but I am older, and a little wiser. And according to the custom of mortal things, this enlightenment comes just when it is most painful to me—most bitter to realize."

"I cannot hear you say so," Lucy said, getting up, trembling, from her chair. "Difference, what difference? I know none. I never have been told of any."

And he looked at her all quivering with the desire to say more—to set open the doors of his heart, and show her herself in it, and all that was there. He looked at her, and shook his head sadly.

"I have no right to say any more—I would be a poor creature if I said any more; but still it is so—and it is better for me to go away. You will not misunderstand me? That would be the cruellest of all."

"I think there is one thing more cruel," said Lucy, with an impulse which carried her away, and for which she could not forgive herself afterward, "and that is to speak mysteries to your friends and expect them to understand you, yet never tell them what you mean—that is the thing that is most cruel."

"Should I speak, then, though it is hopeless—though it is almost dishonorable?" he cried, excited and breathless. Lucy, trembling, turned half, yet but half, away.

"Ah! you are here, then! I have been looking for you," said the voice of Lady Curtis at the door. "You are talking to Lucy, who has a letter to write, and I have something to say to you, Lewis—come to me here."

Lucy had gone back to her writing before her mother stopped speaking. She did not even look at him again; but she said, very low, "I think I understand," as he passed her slowly to obey that call.

And next morning he went away.

CHAPTER XXVI.

After the crisis of that conversation with Mrs. Curtis, which was at the bottom of so much harm and mischief, Arthur and Nancy stopped quarrelling with each other. They had each done and said things which they were disposed to repent of, and felt the existence generally of a state of things which was alarming, which at their worst they could not see without feeling that it might be possible to go too far.

The fact that Arthur had gone away without seeing her after her rudeness to his aunt, his absence for hours, his absolute silence on the subject when they met at dinner, had produced a great effect upon Nancy. It had been on her lips all the evening through to introduce the subject—to excuse herself or defend herself, according as might be most suitable at the moment. But Arthur gave her no occasion. He had the advantage of education over her, the habit of self-restraint; at least, the sense that it was necessary on occasion to restrain himself—an elementary lesson which Nancy had not, as yet, arrived at. And the effect upon her was great. She, *too, kept silent, though against* her will. She *shut up in her breast this subject* which, if she had talked about it, would, no doubt, have inflamed her to double wrath. And she grew a little frightened of the husband whom hitherto she had played with as she would, but who now, in his new-born reserve and stillness, was more than she could manage. She was afraid of him for the moment. He was no longer in her power. A tremendous menace seemed to lurk in his silence; and the consequence was that they lived in much greater harmony for the next week, both a little alarmed and penitent, and afraid of taking another step in the wrong direction.

At the end of that time Arthur made the discovery which Nancy had already suggested to him, that howsoever great might be his desire to go to Italy, his means would not permit it. They had been living in their charming little apartment for three weeks, they had used a carriage constantly, and all that a Paris hotel can furnish that was most agreeable to eye and palate, and there was nothing, or next to nothing, left. Arthur had not realized this fact when he had written his letter to his father. He had written, indeed, more out of the painful determination within him to uphold his wife, even in the face of what she had done to his relatives, by yielding to her will about their future, than from any more reasonable motive. He knew very well how that story would fly, how it would get to the ears of his mother and Lucy, and how everybody who knew him would pity poor Arthur.

This it was which made him suddenly abandon his opposition, and determine to do as she wished. At all hazards he would maintain her credit, whatever might be her treatment of him. They might make her out to be what they pleased, they might tell what stories they would—he could not, he knew, contest them; but, at all events, everybody should see that he, at least, upheld her in her way of acting, gave her his support through all. This generous, if perhaps foolish, resolution, which was full of that grieved and suffering love which can no longer deny the justice of the accusations against its beloved, had been come to before he knew the necessity of returning home; but that necessity made it less forced and unnatural.

For the last week of their stay there was little attempt at amusement. Denham, who had found great satisfaction in watching the proceedings of the bride, and who had already made many circles merry by his descriptions of her husband's anxious endeavors to interest her in what she saw and heard, and her own absolute ignorance and unconcealed *ennui*, was ever at hand to suggest something, and had indeed two or three plans of his own for sharing this charming spectacle with some of his friends, with a trust in Arthur's simplicity which might not have been justified by the event. There were two in particular to whom he had promised an introduction to his "delicious Englishwoman," had the young pair accepted the box at the Odéon which he had offered them, and the mischievous attaché was much disappointed by the failure of his plans. They declined it, however, with one accord.

Nancy had quite convinced herself that it was "no fun" going to plays when you did not understand a word, and Arthur, on his side, had become disgusted with everything public. How did he know that they might not meet some one else whom he should be obliged to introduce to

his wife, and whom his wife would receive with the same amiability which she had shown to Mrs. Curtis? The Curtises were still in Paris, and he had himself held an agitating conference with his aunt and Mary; but they came no more to the Rue de Rivoli. This opportunity of making friends had been turned into the easiest way of making enemies. He would make no more such essays. Accordingly they sat "at home," in the pretty little room with the white walls and white curtains.

Arthur could always write his letters—it was not many he had to write now, as his family correspondence was cut off, and he had dropped most of his friends, but still he kept up the phrase: he wrote his letters, while she sat by the fire, sometimes taking out and putting in frills or trimmings to her dresses, sometimes yawning over a newspaper; they talked to each other a little now and then, and yawned in the intervals; they had no books except a few Tauchnitz volumes, which saved them from a complete breakdown, and they went early to bed, which seemed always a virtuous thing to do.

Thus the days went by. They did not talk any longer about going "home," but it was tacitly understood between them that they were going *back*. This was what they had got to call it. And the day was fixed, and the boxes packed, and all settled, with scarcely any further consultation. Life, however, had become very sober prose after the triumphant exultation of the beginning, when three weeks after their marriage they crossed the Channel again on an early morning, Nancy very ill, and Arthur dignified but pale, and arrived at London on a rainy December night, wet and miserable as anything could well be.

Next day they went *back*. Arthur had taken rooms at the little inn which stood opposite Mr. Eagles's house, looking on the green, where Durant had been lodged. But before they reached that place there was a greeting to be got through at the station, the whole Bates family—no less—having assembled to welcome their daughter. Nancy's spirits had risen from the moment she had touched English soil. She had talked to everybody, guards, porters, the servants at the hotel, with exuberant satisfaction, notwithstanding the bad passage and its natural consequences.

"Oh, what a blessing to be at home!" she said. "Oh, Arthur, isn't it nice to be back? I feel as if I should like to hug everybody. How much nicer everything looks in England! One can have some tea or some beer, instead of always that sour wine; and sausage-rolls and Bath buns!" cried Nancy, looking at these appalling luxuries in the Dover refreshment-room with unfeigned delight. It had been on Arthur's lips to cry out, "For Heaven's sake, speak a little lower!" but he said to himself, what was the use? One or two people turned round and smiled. And she bought a Bath bun, notwithstanding her recent sufferings. It seemed to Nancy better than all the delicate *plats* in the world. It was English, it was adapted to her native tastes and her usually fine digestion. Arthur hurried her away, with the objectionable dainty in a little paper-bag in her hand.

"We must give in to prejudices a little," he said. "You know most people think there is nothing like French cookery."

"I would not give a nice plain English dinner—mother will have one for us to-morrow, I know—for all the little oddments they have in France," said Nancy.

When she was Nancy Bates she did not talk like this, nor eat Bath buns out of paper bags. The fact of being Mrs. Arthur Curtis, with a fine gentleman—an unmistakable "swell"—for a husband, became again an exhilarating consciousness, and turned Nancy's head a little as soon as she had got to England again; and how could she show her satisfaction so well as by that demonstrative indulgence of personal tastes and ostentation of personal satisfaction which is the essence of vulgarity, yet may be the mere froth of ignorance and light-hearted confidence? All this was sufficiently trying to Arthur, especially when strangers heard these patriotic outbursts, and showed by their smiles, as they passed, their appreciation of her simplicity.

But when they got to Underhayes station, where Mrs. Bates, Matilda, and Sarah Jane stood on the platform waiting, Arthur's heart sunk in his bosom. Why? If Nancy's mother had been a duchess, she could not have done anything different. But Mrs. Bates, with her brown front, and the flowers in her bonnet, and Sarah Jane in the latest fashion, were too much for poor Arthur. He busied himself about the luggage, and wondered how it was, for all so many times as he had seen them before, that he had never seen them until now? And this was how he was to be surrounded for the rest of his life! Visions of his mother and Lucy came gliding before him, as he saw Nancy's boxes, so much larger and heavier now than when they went away, lifted out—his own people! with their light steps, their soft voices, the tender delight in their eyes.

Mrs. Bates was probably as fond of her child as Lady Curtis was of Arthur; that she should show that fondness so differently was not her fault, but that of Providence, which had settled her lot in life. He tried to say to himself that this was so, but it was hard. On the whole, the best thing was to look after the boxes until those welcomes and embraces were over, which all the town seemed to have come out to see. Some of Mr. Eagles's "men" were among the passengers by the train. Arthur shrunk among the luggage altogether to escape from their eyes.

"Where is Arthur?" said Mrs. Bates. "I hope Arthur knows that you're not going to be allowed to go off to an inn the first day you come back. To be sure, it's tea, not dinner, as I suppose you've been accustomed to; but tea, with a nice roast chicken and sausages, which is as good as a dinner every day; and it's all ready and waiting. Arthur! How long he is about the boxes, to be sure! Shall we leave him to send them down to The Dragon? and you come along, my Nancy, with me."

"Arthur! Arthur!" cried Sarah Jane at the top of her voice, rushing towards him, "mother's gone on with Nancy, and I'm to wait for you. You needn't be so particular about the boxes; the porter will take them safe enough. And come along—do come along! Nancy's gone on before with mother, and I'm quite hungry for my tea."

One of the "men!"

room.

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"Don't wait for me," he said, faintly. "Go on, please, and I will follow. There are a great many things to be looked after, and I must see what sort of rooms they have given us. Go on, and never mind me."

"Oh, if you're too fine to walk down Underhayes with your own sister-in-law!" cried Sarah Jane; and, to Arthur's great relief, she took offence, and rushed after her mother and sisters, calling this time, "Nancy! Nancy! stop a bit; I'm coming!"

The "man" lingered till she was gone, perhaps with a little pity for the bridegroom. He was a happy boy of twenty, working his eyes out for the Indian Civil examination, who had always been accustomed to think that his was rather a hard case, and that Curtis was a great "swell."

"How d'ye do, Curtis? Can I look after these things for you?" he said, coming up shyly. Arthur made haste to clear every sign of cloudy weather from his downcast face.

"It *is* a bother looking after them," he said; "my first try, you know—and one loses one's temper. Still grinding hard, I suppose?"

"Harder and harder! Eagles gets more mad every day. What lucky fellows some people are!" said the young man, with a little sigh, as he nodded and turned away.

Arthur felt himself echo the sigh. Was it he that was the lucky fellow? He had thought so too when he left Underhayes, carrying with him the bride for whom he had felt willing to relinquish all the world. This is an easy thing enough to say — to relinquish all the world, and carry one's Nancy off into some flowery Eden where nobody could intermeddle with one's bliss—ah, yes; but the Bates family! They, it was evident, would not permit themselves to be relinquished, like all the world. Arthur walked at his leisure, glad to defer the moment of reunion, down to the inn, and saw his rooms and deposited his luggage. Perhaps Nancy had a right to be angry when at last he followed her. They had waited till the chicken and sausages were nearly cold; but by this time they were in the middle of their meal, Mr. Bates already in his slippers at the foot of the table, when Arthur arrived. The little parlor was hot and close, full of mingled odors; they were all a little flushed, what with the unusual warmth, what with the meal. Nancy herself had been placed next to the fire, as the traveller to whom the best place was necessarily given, and she was crimson with excitement, pleasure, anger, and the stifling atmosphere all combined. The voices all ceased when Arthur came in.

"I think you might have paid my mother the respect of coming directly!" said Nancy, in high tones.

"Oh, hush, dear, hush! I am sure Arthur didn't mean any rudeness," said Mrs. Bates.

But there was an interval of silence, marking general disapproval, and they all turned to look at him as at a culprit. He sat down in the vacant place much against his will, amidst unfriendly or indignant looks. Even to the Bates family he was no longer welcome as an angel from heaven.

"I am sorry everything is cold," said Mrs. Bates; "we waited as long as we could. But *Nancy wanted her tea very badly after her journey. Here is a leg of chicken I saved for you.*"

"I am not hungry," said Arthur, feeling his new alienation and separation amidst all the silent party. "I will take a cup of tea, please. I had the boxes to look after."

"You might have left the boxes to take care of themselves," said his wife; "you are not always so careful. You might have come with me, when I first came home after being married, and all the people about staring; but you don't mind! It used to be different when we were here before; but I ain't of so much consequence now!" cried Nancy. "Wives are different from sweethearts; I see that all now!"

Arthur felt a sensation of chill despair come over him in the midst of this domestic heat. He restrained himself by a strange effort and would say nothing; and, indeed, he did not feel the impulse of passion to speak. A dreary despondency took possession of him. How often he had sat there on the sofa in the corner, and felt himself happy! What was it that made the change? for Nancy had shown "tempers," fits of caprice, uncertainty of mood, before their marriage. But it had not affected him as it did now. Succor came to him, however, in an unexpected way.

"I don't approve of nagging at a man, whatever he's done," said Mr. Bates. "If you've had any tiffs honey-mooning, you should have the sense to stop 'em now. If you like to quarrel in your own place, I'll not interfere—I haven't got the right; but don't do it here. Your father's house is no more than a friend's house, so far as that goes. It ain't your place, Nancy, to expose your husband here."

"I hope I know what's my place as well as you or any one," said Nancy, growing red, and accepting the challenge. She had never been fond of restraint, and she liked it now less than ever. She gave her head a toss of defiance, intrenched as she was behind the walls of support and shelter which her mother and sisters gave, who unconditionally took her side. She flashed defiance at the other end of the table, where Arthur sat with a flush of shame on his face, and poor Mr. Bates, in his crumpled white tie, for his sole partisan.

"I think Mr. Bates is right," said Arthur, "and that it would be better to postpone this question till we are alone."

"And I hope you found Paris pleasant, sir," said the well-intentioned father. "I have often heard that it was a very fine city. It must have been a great advantage for Nancy, seeing it with one that knew it well. In my young days going to France was more of a business than going to America is now. Me and Mrs. Bates never had the benefit of foreign travel; but there are a many things you young people enjoy now that your fathers and your mothers didn't have."

"You may speak for yourself, Mr. Bates," said his wife. "I cannot say that I ever had any desire to go to foreign parts. There is plenty to learn in England if one would make a good use of what one knows; and Nancy, poor child, don't seem to have enjoyed it. Look how thin she is, and so pale! She quite frightened me when I saw her first. 'Is that my blooming Nancy!' I said to myself—not meaning to throw any reflection upon Arthur. What does a man know of such things? She's been doing too much. I feel sure that's what it is, rattling

about here and there and everywhere, and engagements in the evening—"

"We didn't have many engagements in the evening," said Nancy. "We used to go to the theatres at first; but we soon got tired. The acting was so bad, not like English acting; and such queer French, not a bit like anything I ever learned. For one thing, they talk so fast. But I could not understand a bit, and what was the good of going to a play and not understanding a word? And we never saw anybody, except an aunt of Arthur's, a person—but I won't speak of her, for she was rude to me—and Sir John Denham, who used to come and sit of an evening, and who brought us tickets for places. It was very kind of him; and there was a lot of places to see, and a whole lot of old pictures and things that Arthur thought I was to go crazy over; but I never did. One place was where some prison was knocked down (I never remembered the names), and another was where the queen had her head cut off."

"Oh la!" cried Sarah Jane.

"Yes, that was a pleasant thing to be interested in, wasn't it? Oh, the lots and lots of people that had their heads cut off, if you could put any faith in it! As if that was what one wanted to see! I never believed one quarter of what they said."

"And quite right," said her mother; "they do make up stories. But didn't you go to see something a little livelier, Nancy? I thought there was everything that was gay in Paris. But if that was all, my poor child, I don't wonder if you felt low, away from everybody you knew. But things will be quite different now," she said, encouragingly. "You will settle down, you and Arthur, in a nice snug little English 'ome. There is no place like 'ome, as the song says. And you'll fall into each other's ways; and you'll have us close at hand if anything's wrong. Oh, you'll see everything will go as smooth as velvet! and me, or Sarah Jane, or Matty always to help you to put things straight."

At this prospect Nancy brightened up, and the conversation went on in a livelier strain. But Nancy's brows lowered when Arthur, feeling it all grow more and more intolerable, got up just before the rum-and-water stage, under pretence of business.

"I have some letters which I must write," he said. Nancy's countenance grew dark again, and Mr. Bates lamented audibly.

"I thought you'd have joined me and been comfortable, now you're a married man and got your courting over," said the tax-collector. Poor Arthur! Was this expected of him, that he should share the rum-and-water too? He scarcely knew how he managed to get away at last, promising to return for his wife when his letters were written. But he had in reality no letters to write. He walked about through the darkness very sadly, wondering what he was to do. It was weak, perhaps, to have yielded to her, to have suffered her to lead him back here; it was all intolerable—the house, the family, the talk. They had been well enough once; how did it happen that they were beyond all patience now?

CHAPTER XXVII.

Next day, restored to perfect good-humor by the occupation, Nancy went out with her mother to look at some houses which they had already selected for her choice. She came into the little sitting-room, in which Arthur had talked to Durant about his marriage, and where the young pair were established now—glowing and beaming from her early walk, to tell him all about these desirable residences. Rose Villas, Glenfield Road, was the name of the row, in which there were two houses, one empty, and one furnished, to be let.

"You must come with me and see them the moment you have had your lunch—I don't want any lunch," cried Nancy. "I am so delighted! The dearest little houses, Arthur! just big enough for us; and so bright, with gardens back and front, and everything that heart could desire."

"But we don't want two houses, do we?" he said.

"No, you silly boy; but if we take the one that is furnished, don't you see, for a little while, and the one that is not furnished for a permanency, then we can be comfortable in the one house while we furnish the other. Ain't that clever?" said Nancy, laughing. "I can't fancy anything more delightful, Make haste with your luncheon, Arthur. Oh yes, I will sit down with you, I will take a morsel; but I am in such a hurry! I do hope you will like them as much as I do. It is so nice to think of having a 'ome, as mother says!"

Arthur did not make any reply; after so much stormy weather as there had been, it grieved him to destroy all this sunshine by any remonstrances. He was glad to bask in it a little, and put off the next difficulty. It was a bright winter afternoon when they sallied forth together, the red sun descending towards the west, and throwing up all the leafless trees beyond Mr. Eagles's great house as on a crimson background, against which every branch and twig stood out—the green more brilliantly green than usual from the many rains and from the afternoon redness which enhanced its color—the red-brick houses all ruddy and warm in the light.

Even to Arthur, whose heart was heavy, it was a pleasant walk to Glenfield Road. They were alone, and Nancy was in the gayest humor, full of satisfaction with herself. Though she had lost her confidence in the Paris dresses, which had much disappointed her mother and sisters, and was afraid that her travelling costume looked dreadfully dowdy (which was Sarah Jane's opinion), yet the sense of being at home, able to dazzle all her old companions with her good fortune, and to feel that her house and husband, and all her possessions, would be admired and be envied by the right people, had calmed all Nancy's susceptibilities and raised her spirits to the highest point. She all but danced along the street, holding Arthur's arm in a way which may be old-fashioned, but still comes natural to a bride. She was about to have a house of her own, a house fit
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servants!
Bates en

as good as the vicar or any of the fine people on the green. And all these fine people would call upon her, Nancy thought. Who was there among them equal to Mrs. Arthur Curtis, a baronet's daughter-in-law, some time or other to be Lady Curtis—a baronet's wife?—and who could speak familiarly of other baronets, Denham, for instance, as an intimate friend. And then there was Durant.

"Who is Durant," she said, "Arthur? Is he anybody? is his father anybody? I had a long talk with him here once. I was angry—but, on the whole, I liked Durant."

"He is—my oldest friend; and the man in all the world who knows most about me," said Arthur, laughing in spite of himself; "but further information would not enlighten you, Nancy—"

"You mean that I don't know your peerages, and that sort of thing," said Nancy, piqued a little.

This time Arthur laughed with good-will. "I don't think the peerages would help you much," he said. "Lewis Durant is a clergyman's son, Nancy."

"*Only* a clergyman?" She was disappointed. "But they must have been very rich or something, Arthur, or such proud folks as your people would not have let Durant be so intimate with you."

"My people," said Arthur, with some haste, "would not have thought of interfering with my school friends to ask whose sons they were; and Lewis's family *were* rich, but they are not rich now. Call him Lewis, if you please, when you speak of him, Nancy; but don't say Durant. It sounds *fast;* and you never will be fast, I hope."

"Oh, it sounds fast, do you think?" Nancy was mollified. When he had made the same request before, she had thought it a stigma upon her as not knowing how a lady should talk, but this was a lesser offence. "Well, then, Mr. Durant—if I must say Mr. Durant—isn't he rich now?"

"No, not at all rich."

"Oh, then I suppose he has to work for his living, like—any common man? I am so glad you are not like that, Arthur. What a difference it must make! To have one's husband away all day at his work—or to have one's husband always at one's side, ready to take a walk, or to answer a question, or anything. I am so glad you are a gentleman, Arthur! I never should have been happy had I married a man in any other rank of life."

"Durant is just as much a gentleman as I am, Nancy."

"What! when he has to work for his living? Oh yes, I know. Whoever wears good clothes, and knows how to behave himself in society, is called a gentleman, for the name of the thing, Arthur. The assistants in Shoolbred's are all gentlemen, of course; but that is not what I mean—you know what I mean. Now, supposing that Durant—I mean Mr. Durant—had known us longer, and got to coming to our house as you did, and Sarah Jane and he had fancied each other, she would not have been nearly so happy as I am."

"Was *that* thought of?" said Arthur, with a smile which did not evidence any real amusement. *"I did not know* that had been seriously *thought of."*

"Oh yes, it was thought of. Why shouldn't it have happened? He was your friend; and they say one wedding brings on another. I don't think Sarah Jane would have minded," said Nancy, in perfect good faith. "She would have thrown Raisins over in a moment; and indeed I think she treats Raisins very badly, with all her flirtations. I tell her it is he who will throw her over one of these days."

"So Durant might have been preferred to Mr. Raisins," said Arthur. "What a chance for Lewis!"

Nancy did not feel quite comfortable about the meaning of this laugh. Perhaps it was not entirely regret for what Durant had lost; but as at this moment they came in sight of Rose Villas, her whole attention was drawn to the more exciting subject. "There is the empty one, Arthur," she said; "look, how pretty! But I see the door of No. 6 is open, so let us go there first. There is such a pretty garden behind, and the windows open into it. There is not much in the garden now, but it will be delicious in summer. Oh yes, here we are. This is Mr. Curtis, Mrs. Smith. We have come again, if you please, to go over the house."

"If you please, ma'am," said the prim little landlady, whose lodgings had not let so well as usual, and who was not unwilling to get rid of her house. Nancy ran through it delighted, taking her husband from one room to another. "This you could have to write your letters in, Arthur; and this would be my drawing-room," cried Nancy, glowing with not unlovely pride; "and look what a dear little davenport, and an inlaid table, and that funny little three-cornered thing in the corner, and a nice white cloth over the carpet—so clean-looking—almost like our white carpets in Paris."

Arthur allowed himself to be dragged all over the house. It was like a hundred, nay a million, other semi-detached suburban villakins. The little rooms were neat enough, if not beautiful; and Arthur, though he had been brought up in Oakley, amidst his mother's favorite splendors, was not sufficiently fastidious to be annoyed by the commonplace surroundings. It was not the want of beauty that moved him; but the sensation of "settling down," which was so delightful to Nancy, affected his imagination like a nightmare. She was so satisfied herself, so anxious to know every particular about the maids whom Mrs. Smith "could recommend," so eager about everything, that his gloomy looks passed without remark. And Arthur did not check her delight until, having settled matters with Mrs. Smith, she insisted upon carrying him, next, to No. 9, which was to let unfurnished. "This is the most interesting," she said. "Come along, Arthur; for you know this will be our real 'ome—this we will furnish ourselves;" and she dragged him to the door. Nancy did not usually drop her h's, but she was too familiar with this form of the word to call it anything but 'ome.

Here, however, Arthur had strength of mind to resist. "That is enough for to-day. You must not ask me to do more to-day. After dinner we will talk it all over, all about it, over the fire."

"After dinner?" said Nancy. "Oh! I said we would go and see mother, and tell her what we had settled. Why, what is the matter, Ar-

thur—may not I go and see mother? We have only been one day back, and you begin to make faces already! You cannot say I am bringing my people on *you!*"

"I think you might be content with me sometimes," said Arthur, with an attempt at a smile.

"I have been content with you for three weeks," said Nancy. "I have never seen a soul but you. I should think you would like to see another face now and again as well as I do —and my own folks!" Arthur did not say any more. He diverted the conversation into other channels, and led her back to the subject of the villa, which, on the whole, was safer ground; and when the evening came and their dinner was over, and Nancy went off with a certain gay temerity, yet not without alarm, to get her wrap, Arthur took his hat to accompany her without saying a word. She was in a state of the greatest exultation, scarcely able to restrain little songs of triumph as they walked along the half-lighted street, and clasping his arm close, with a show of affection which went to Arthur's heart.

"At what time shall I come for you?" he said, as they drew near the door.

"Come for me! Are you not coming with me, Arthur?"

"I have not finished my letters," he said. "As *you* say, we have had three weeks of holiday; and then I was out with you all this afternoon. I must finish my letters for the post tonight."

She unclasped her hands from his arm without a word and went in; and the glimpse Arthur had of the parlor did not tempt him to follow. Young Raisins was one of the company. He was seated on the sofa where Arthur had been in the habit of sitting, presumably behind backs and out of the observation of the others, with Nancy. Young Raisins was now the lover on hand, and the sight of him in that place sent the blood to Arthur's head as he walked away. Could it be possible that he himself had been unspeakably happy there a few weeks ago, finding nothing but pleasantness in the four strait walls, and beauty in the family affection that made all these people hang so closely together?

Raisins now occupied the foreground of the picture, as he had done before, with infinitely greater suitability. And this was the home which his wife loved. There was the sting of it! Had she been indifferent, undutiful—even careless, as he thought he remembered that she once was; but Nancy's matrimonial experience, which was not entirely successful, perhaps, had thrown her back upon her earlier affections in a way which is not unusual, though Arthur was not aware of that. Her husband and she had only their love to hold them together; their habits were not alike, their manner of thought was different. Even when she was at her boldest and most confident point, Nancy was never quite at home with the "gentleman" she had married; but with her own people she was entirely at her ease.

Arthur did not take this into consideration; but he was candid enough to feel a compunction as he walked away, and to acknowledge that from Nancy's point of view it might seem hard that he could not spend an hour or two without complaining in the society of the family who had been everything to her all her life. It was hard that so soon, before a month of her married life was over, she should have to choose between the old home and the new, between her parents and her husband. Arthur had a generous mind, and this perception kept him from feeling himself the aggrieved person, as he had been half disposed to do. It forced him, also, instead of wandering about as he had done on the previous night, and brooding over the difficulties of his new position, to go back to his hotel and really write the half-imaginary letters which were his only business, and the reason which he had again given for his abandonment of that family circle. His letters were not all imaginary: there was one from Mr. Rolt, the agent, in answer to Arthur's letter to his father. Sir John had been too indignant, as well as perhaps (but this he was not conscious of) too little disposed for exertion to answer it himself. He had handed over the note, not to the lawyer brother, against whom Arthur had vowed vengeance, but to the agent, who had always been a favorite, the friend of their youth, with the young Curtises, both boy and girl. Mr. Rolt's letter was very kind and reasonable, and to answer it without proving himself to be in the wrong was difficult. Sir John did not object to raising his allowance—he did not refuse anything Arthur asked him. There was nothing hard in the stipulations, nothing forbidding in what his father's deputy wrote.

"Your family do not wish you to suffer, how could you think it?—they do not wish to reduce you from your natural position. Had you treated them as they might have expected to be treated, my dear Arthur," wrote the good man who had known him all his life, "you might, I think, have reckoned on Sir John's indulgence to any extent; but you have not put that trust in your father and mother, though they certainly deserved it at your hands; and can you wonder if Sir John is angry? He will not write to you himself, feeling that your letter is not the kind of letter he ought to have had from you in the circumstances; but he has instructed me to tell you that your wishes shall be complied with to any reasonable amount. He does not wish you to suffer in personal comfort in consequence of the step you have taken."

This was the letter which Arthur had to answer. He paused, reflecting on it, repeating to himself, "Does not wish you to suffer in personal comfort." Were there other ways which they suspected and calculated upon in which he might suffer for his disobedience? He paused to go over all that had happened within the last three months. Could he have acted otherwise than he had done? If he had given his confidence to his parents from the beginning, as they reproached him for not doing, what would have been the issue? With what eyes would Lady Curtis and Lucy have looked upon his Nancy, who, for her part, would have defied them? He shook his head as he sat pondering over the sheet of paper before him. No! no! had he confided in them, things would have been worse, not better—for anyhow he would have married Nancy: if without their consent, if against their deliberate judgment, what did it matter, except that the last would have been the worst? He could fancy how she would have met their inspection—how she would have repulsed and scorned them. No, no, he repeated to himself,

Better to leave them in ignorance than to hazard the open quarrels, the inevitable rending asunder that must have followed. They could not have withdrawn his heart from Nancy. No; again no! And the breach would have been more bitter, not less.

With a sigh he decided that, on the whole, he had not chosen the worst way. He did not say to himself that both were bad enough, but he sighed. Nancy had left him to go to her family, to be happy in the stuffy little parlor, where her father drank his rum-and-water; and he—he sighed, going no farther—for *his* belongings, for his home, for the natural occupations of his life. They did not regret their choice, either of them; but yet within the first month of their marriage, this curious return upon themselves had happened to both.

Perhaps this is not so wonderful, even among the happiest, as we pretend; for is not the beginning the hardest, in marriage as in so many other things? Arthur wrote and posted his letter, feeling himself bound to do so after what he had said; then went on to fetch his wife from her father's house. They were very merry there, he could hear, as he passed the lighted window; and it was more and more curious to him, when he in went, to find young Raisins the master of the situation, amusing them all with his jokes.

Arthur, in his time, had never had so much *succès*. He was rather glad to see that Nancy was not enjoying the fun like the rest, but sat a little apart, and with a somewhat moody countenance until he entered, when she flung off her gravity, plunged into the riot that was going on round the table, where Mr. Raisins was doing some tricks with cards, and laughed and talked with the best. Arthur could not make out whether this was to show him her superior gayety and light-heartedness at home, or whether it was his own presence which brought back her light-heartedness. And he himself, touched by compunction, did his best to make himself agreeable, to show that he wished for a good intelligence between them. He was more successful in this than he had hoped. Young Raisins's fine qualities had so charmed and delighted the house that Arthur too shared the good feeling he had called forth. Mrs. Bates melted altogether, and spreading out her hands declared that "this *was* a happy meeting," and that "parents" had reason to be satisfied, indeed, when their girls were thus happily settled. "When you all rally round the 'old house,'" were the words the gratified mother used; but, unfortunately, in the general impulse of emotion that followed, Arthur could scarcely restrain a slight laugh, which Nancy, who seemed to be all ear, remarked, though no one else noticed it. Why should he laugh? He would not have laughed had it been the old house of Oakley, amidst its trees and parks, that was to be rallied round; and why not the small tenement in East Street, Underhayes? Was it possible that materialism could go so far as to measure sentiment by the size of the house? He said this to himself, yet still laughed in his mind, and could not tell why.

"I hope you have written your letters," Nancy said, coldly, as they walked home.

"Yes; the one I specially wanted to write is *gone*. It was an answer to Mr. Rolt's which I *told you about.*"

"Then you will have no excuse about writing letters to-mor—I mean another night. You will not have that reason to give for staying away."

"You do not want me to spend every evening at your mother's, Nancy?"

"Ah, now it comes out!" she said. "I knew it all along. It was not letters, but because you wanted to escape from us, from my family, whom you look down upon. If you despise them, you should never have married me; for I will stick to them as long as I live."

"I am not in the habit of making lying excuses," said Arthur, as calmly as he could; "and it is not necessary," he added, after a pause, controlling the sentiment in his voice, "to despise a family because you do not wish to be with them every night."

"Every night! This is the second night," cried Nancy, in high disdain.

"Nancy," said Arthur, "do not let us quarrel. I don't want to interfere with your natural affection, but you cannot expect me to feel exactly as you do. It is not possible. And don't you think it would be wise to agree that there are great differences between your family and me? that we are likely to agree better apart? and that a meeting now and then would be best, not too often? I don't want to dictate to you—"

"No; it would be more wise, as you say, not to try," said Nancy. "I see now. This is why you wouldn't condescend to look at the other house. Ah, I see! you mean to go away, to leave this place, which is the only place I can be happy in. This is your plan? Oh, I allow it is a fine plan, but it will not be so easy to carry out!"

"I don't want, I say, to dictate to you. I don't want you to give up anything that is important for your happiness. But I have given up my people for you, Nancy—"

"Then go back to your people, and have done with it!" cried Nancy, throwing herself free from his arm, to which she had been clinging, and pushing him from her. Arthur was so startled to find himself driven to the edge of the pavement by this energetic impulse that even the power of speech seemed taken from him. And what was there to say?

CHAPTER XXVIII.

Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Curtis settled down in a day or two into No. 6 Rose Villas, where Nancy had her two maids to manage, and all that had seemed to her most delightful and desirable in life. The little drawing-room was not a particularly genial place in winter weather; the carpet was covered with a white linen cloth tightly strained, there were white muslin curtains at the windows, the walls were white and gold, after the approved fashion of little drawing-rooms in little villas. All this, if it was very clean-looking, as Nancy said, was chilly in December; and the little fireplace was so near the long French window, and both were so near the door, that the room was draughty, and scarcely so cosy as might have been desired. There was a piano in it, upon which Nancy could not play, though she had received lessons on the piano during those five quarters in which she had been at school;

and a work-table, which she did not employ much for work; but no books, nor any pictures on the white-and-gold walls.

When Arthur had exerted himself in the rearrangement of the furniture, which Nancy did not go into with any enthusiasm — for she was still of opinion that a row of chairs set against the wall were "in their proper place," and that to disturb them was almost an immorality—the discovery that he had nothing to do pressed with more and more force upon him. What did he want with anything to do? Nancy thought. Was it not the best thing in the world not to require to do anything, the true sign of being a gentleman? A certain scorn of people who worked for their living had taken possession of Mrs. Arthur Curtis. Why should they give themselves airs when they were all as one as a bricklayer, working for their bread? But any one could see that Arthur was a gentleman.

It is to be hoped that gentlemen in general were more at their ease under the burden of their gentility than Arthur. It was not—let no one be deceived—that he wanted to work. Work, when he had read with Mr. Eagles, had been extremely irksome to the young man. It was true, he had not remained very long to try it, but he had not loved his studies, especially under the spur of the sharp and urgent "coach." There are other things, however, which young men think of when they talk of having "something to do," which do not tell very much in an industrial point of view.

In his natural condition and at home, Arthur had many occupations. He shot, he hunted, he rode about the country, he paid visits; he was appealed to by people in trouble; he was consulted about the affairs of the estate. Sometimes he had to appear on the hustings in support of his father's election; he had speeches to make now and then, and that interest in public business which is indispensable to one who may sometimes have to take part in it. All this was at an end now. The calm, not to say stagnation, of his present existence dropped over him, as the curtain drops in a theatre upon the animated and busy scene.

After the drama is over, or in the moment of repose between its acts, it is some immovable representation of life or scenery, an unchangeable incident or landscape, that closes for us the brilliant stage upon which human life in all its changeableness and variety of emotion has been represented. Arthur's domestic bliss was like this drop-scene. His life was gone from him, with all its hopes and occupations; he was no longer the young squire, as potent within his small territory as any Prince of Wales; no longer the budding magnate of the county, with responsibilities rising round him, with the covers to think of (if nothing more), and poachers to take in hand, and public life to look forward to. All that fuller existence had departed. The drop-scene, representing a white-and-gold bower of bliss, with two figures seated (before the fire; but that was a matter of detail), all in all to each other, as romantic people say, had fallen with a remorseless completeness, hiding everything. He took a long walk with his wife every afternoon. Often he went out in the evening to fetch her from her father's, or else he had the pleasure of entertaining her father and mother at home; and he would stroll out on his own account here and there, in the mornings, while Nancy was pretending to do her housekeeping, or read the *Times* languidly in the room appropriated to him, feeling as if all the busy commotion of the world indicated in it had gone away to such a distance from him that he could but faintly apprehend or understand it. The drop-scene! To what innocent bosom would not that picture have commended itself? Two figures, young and fair to behold, the world forgetting, by the world forgot; living for each other, all for love, and the world well lost.

This went on for what was really a long time without disturbance. The establishment of the Arthur Curtises in Rose Villas gave the little world of Underhayes many causes of deliberation. Should they call? was a question hotly discussed. Call? on Bates the tax-collector's daughter! Could anything be more absurd? the elder ladies said. But the younger ones were interested—who would not be interested in such a romantic business?—and the gentlemen were either sorry for or curious about the young husband who had thus sacrificed everything to "a pretty face." For the girl was just an uneducated girl, like any other in her position, everybody said. There was no innate superiority in Nancy to justify her elevation; neither had her husband taken pains, as even a romantic young fool, now and then, did, to educate her before making her his wife.

Even now, so far as any one knew, no attempt was being made to qualify Mrs. Arthur for her husband's position in society. They had settled at Rose Villas, avowedly that she might be near her mother, with whom she was said to spend half her time; and no judicious governess or master able to impart instruction in those accomplishments which must have been wanting in her was ever seen to enter her gates. Not even trying to improve her mind! She got the pick of the novels which came in Mudie's box to the local library, in right of an unusually liberal subscription; but what could novels do for her? Under these circumstances, it became a doubly difficult question to know what to do. When she came home at first she had been very well dressed, which had made an impression in her favor. Her dark-blue "silk" had filled the green with admiration and envy. "Paris, of course!" the ladies said, who, notwithstanding their disapproval of such a marriage, were very curious indeed about the bride; and some added a joke or a sigh at the idea of putting delicate garments from Paris, not upon such as themselves, who could appreciate them, but upon Nancy Bates!

However, this mingled approbation and disdain soon came to an end, for it was not long before the dark-blue silk was thrown aside in favor of more showy garments. "If that is all they can do in Paris!" Sarah Jane had said, at the sight of it, and she had spent some time at a milliner's in town and ought to know. Her own family all thought Nancy's dresses dowdy, and ridiculously quiet for a bride; and the original "silk," which her parents had given her had been brought to the front again, with others of a similar character.

"I made myself a dowdy to please Arthur. He likes it," said Nancy; "but one can't go on humoring one's husband forever, can one, mam-

ma? One must think for one's self sooner or later, and ladies surely know best about their own dress."

Arthur had not attempted any remonstrance; what was the use? And Nancy had reappeared with a brightness of color and breadth of ornament which pleased her family a great deal better.

"Now you look something like a newly married lady, with a husband that grudges you nothing," Mrs. Bates said proudly, on that day when the green shuddered at Mrs. Arthur's new costume, and resolved with one mind, now at least, that nobody could be expected to call. But such resolutions did not always overcome the stronger inducements of curiosity, or of that pity and interest which moved some bosoms. Mrs. Eagles was the first to break the reserve. Her husband insisted upon it, she said. And she not only called, but asked "the Arthur Curtises" to dinner. Mrs. Eagles was a mild little woman, as soft-voiced as her husband was peremptory. She avowed frankly that she had been "very fond" of Arthur while he lived in her house. "He was so nice, he never would give any trouble that he could help, so unlike your *parvenus;* he was always so ready to do anything for you. Yes, I was very fond of him. The pupils are not attractive, as a rule, but young Mr. Curtis was charming." This was what she said to her neighbors when it was known that she had asked the bride to dinner, the boldest thing that had been done on the green for many a day.

"I hope you found *her* charming, too," said the vicar's wife, who was not disposed to compromise her dignity in such a way. Mrs. Eagles took a little time to answer the question, and cleared her throat.

"She is—quite uninformed; I almost wonder that associating with a well-bred man should have had so little effect upon her manners. But then she is natural—she has no affectations; that is always something," said Mrs. Eagles, which was not the case with the vicar's wife. She did not, however, ask the dignified couple from the vicarage, but only a humbler newly married curate to meet the young pair, who, for their part, were thrown into considerable excitement by the invitation. How Nancy might have taken it on her own account is doubtful; but the delight of her family had driven all thoughts from her mind but those of delightful elevation in the world and entrance into society.

"It's only a school-master, it is true," said Mrs. Bates; "no better, indeed not so good as ourselves, for I never was brought to such a pass that I had to take in lodgers to interfere with the family. I always was able to keep ourselves to ourselves, and of course the pupils are all the same as lodgers; but still you'll meet the real gentry there, my pet, and it will be a beginning, and you needn't be shy with people like them." Thus encouraged, Nancy allowed herself to feel that to go out to a party was pleasant. For she too, though she had the distractions of her family and her housekeeping, was growing a little tired perhaps of the drop-scene.

They were all very indignant, however, when Arthur suggested that she should wear a simple white dress for this first appearance. White, *like an unmarried girl!* and as if her husband *was not well enough off to afford her a* "silk!" Finally, with great hurry and strain of all their efforts to get it ready in time, Nancy appeared in light-blue, which was becoming enough, though rather incomplete in those finishing touches which mark the difference between a home-made garment and one which has come from the hands of the initiated.

As for Arthur, he laughed at himself, not without a little bitterness, as he made his simple toilet. He was pleased to be asked out to dinner by his former "coach." It excited him vaguely, partly with pleasure, partly with anxiety. It was "revisiting the glimpses of the moon," for the first time for all these months; for the slow winter had crept round to March again, and all the world was stirring into life. To describe the kind of Christmas this poor young fellow had spent would be too much for ordinary powers—exiled as he was from everything belonging to himself, and driven into close, too close, encounter with all the jollities of so different a sphere. He had borne them, and kept them at arm's-length, as far as he could, and, thank Heaven! they were over.

But the impatience in his heart grew stronger as the days grew longer, and the world turned to spring. He was as glad of Mr. Eagles's invitation as if the "coach" had been prime minister, with all manner of advantages to bestow. That impetuous little personage could not, had he gained first places for all his pupils in all the examinations under the sun, have put himself in the same position with the son of such a rural magnate as Sir John Curtis; but Arthur was as glad of his notice and his wife's notice, as if the level of the Bates family had been his own original level.

Nevertheless, there were difficulties in launching Nancy even into this mild little scholastic world. Arthur did not feel that he could venture to give her those hints about the manners of ordinary society which might have steered her safely through the not appalling dangers of a dinner-party. He did what he could by way of suggestion and supposition, taking it for granted that she would know; but even that simple mode of communicating instruction aroused her suspicions. "Oh, you needn't be afraid; I know how to behave myself!" she said, with a toss of her head. How did she know—was it by instinct? Instinct is a doubtful guide through the usages of society; but, anyhow, Arthur did not venture to say any more. When she came down-stairs, however, ready to start, with her blue dress all decorated and looped up with orange-blossoms, Arthur made a determined stand. He said, "You must take those things off; they are ridiculous!" with a peremptoriness which she could not resist, saucy as she was. Arthur at this moment did not seem a person to be trifled with. "Do you want to make a laughing-stock of your sister?" the young man said, confounding them all; and the obnoxious decorations were taken off with a silent speed that was wonderful. It was wonderful, as being inspired by a mysterious sense of having made a mistake. They had no idea what the mistake was; and their pride would not permit them to ask enlightenment; but they felt it the more from its mysterious and unknown character.

When Nancy was ready, and wrapped in the

warm white *sortie du bal* which they had bought in Paris, the effect of this error was sufficiently obliterated; and the young husband's heart swelled with a little pride when he presented her to the man who had sent him out of his house because of Nancy. That practical protestation had not done much more good than all the other efforts which had been made to sever Arthur from his love; and here she was now, fair and blooming, an unquestionable fact, which they were all compelled to recognize. But as he left her in charge of Mrs. Eagles, and dropped off behind, what anxiety was in Arthur's thoughts! It was her first essay in society; would she take the trouble to please? He stood furtively watching her as he talked to the curate, whose wife was also on her trial, but caused him no such tremor. The curate's wife was a small young lady of ordinary breeding and appearance, not to be compared with Nancy in any possible respect. But she had been born a clergyman's, not a tax-collector's, daughter. She knew the outside of social ways, and how not to commit herself, which was exactly what Nancy did not know.

And it must be allowed that, when Arthur saw that only this curate and his wife had been invited to meet them, he was wroth with a savage sort of anger and scornful humiliation. He gave no sign of his feelings; but he had been accustomed to be somebody wherever he went, and the sense that he had now dropped into a doubtful position, in which only the curate could be supposed likely to countenance him, gave him a sense of what had befallen him more sharp and sudden than anything else that had happened, even than the familiarities of the Bates family. To say that Nancy was angry, too, would be little. Her whole soul rose up in a blaze of wrath. She had expected to see everything that was fine and famous on the green, and to receive, in a way, the homage of the assembled aristocracy. Nobody with a title lived at Underhayes, and Nancy considered that she herself had all but a title, and was to be admired in proportion; yet there was no one here but the little curate's wife. She talked largely to Mr. Eagles during dinner, giving him her opinion of society in England.

"Of course, being brought up in a place like this, I have seen but little; and here not much to speak of," she said, with a frankness that prepossessed her host—himself so trenchant and decided at all times.

"You are right, very right, Mrs. Curtis. The people about here are not much to speak of. We have to put up with it, for we can get no better. Retired people are mostly a set of nuisances: having done all the mischief they can in the world in their own persons, they revile everybody who is beginning, and put mischief into their heads."

"Yes, Dr. Eagles"—he was called "Doctor" by the common people about, and he did not like it—"yes; there never was such a gossiping place, I've heard many people say. They have nothing to do themselves, and they pull everybody to pieces. I have never gone into it, but I can't abide that sort of thing. They are so stuck up!—don't you think they are dreadfully stuck up?—and what is there in them to make them better than their *neighbors*? Don't you think so, Dr. Eagles? I do hate everything like that!" said Nancy, energetically. "I suppose you did not like to ask them to meet Arthur and me?"

"I—I don't ask any one," said Mr. Eagles, taken aback for the moment. "It is my wife that asks the people." Then he began to realize that getting out of a difficulty by putting it upon his wife was not a noble proceeding. "The fact is, I don't think any one was asked. We thought, I suppose, that you didn't care for it. I don't myself. I hope Curtis is not giving up work altogether. He may be tempted to do so, having no immediate object, but he ought never to interrupt his course of study. He was getting on very well with me."

"What should he go on with his studies for?" said Nancy; "he does not require it to make a living. He may please himself what he does. Oh, I shouldn't like my husband to have to work! When a man is born a gentleman, Dr. Eagles—"

"You have been good enough to bestow a degree upon me to which I have no right," said Mr. Eagles. "I am simple Mr., like all the rest, though I am obliged to work for my living, and it would be of use to me. A man ought to work, however, when he's young like Curtis. If he doesn't now, he will miss it after. I've always told him so."

"I am sure I don't think so at all," said Nancy. "Why should he work? or any one in the position of a gentleman? You know what I mean by a gentleman. Father is as good as Arthur, or any one, and he has to work."

This mollified Mr. Eagles.

"I hope we are all gentlemen," he said, as lightly as was possible for him, "whether we work or not."

"Oh yes, in a kind of a way," said Nancy, with careless scorn, "in your manners, and so forth. And clergymen, and teachers, and those sort of people are called so out of civility; but I never think anybody is a gentleman that has his own living to make."

"I think you are a little hard upon us, Mrs. Curtis," said the curate, with a smile.

"Oh, I didn't mean to be hard," said Nancy. "You are just as good as any one else. Those that have plenty to live on are the best off, but I don't say that I despise those that have to work. They are good enough in their way. It isn't their fault they were born as they are, nor was it any virtue in my husband to be born Arthur Curtis. He couldn't help it, neither can you."

Thus Nancy vanquished the adversary at the dinner-table. Then the ladies went back to the drawing-room, which was not till a late hour, for it took a long time to make Nancy understand Mrs. Eagles's little nods and signs from the other end of the table; but when they got up-stairs at last, the curate's wife benevolently interfered to set Nancy at ease after this mistake.

"I dare say you have been used to the French way of the men coming up-stairs along with the ladies; and a far better plan it is, I think."

Nancy looked coolly at the questioner. She was more comfortable when Arthur's eyes were not upon her, watching everything she said and did.

"I didn't make any mistake," she said, "but gentlemen's conversation is the best, isn't it? I wanted to have as much as I could of that. I didn't want to be left to women's society—three

petticoats together," and she laughed with insolent meaning. Nancy had read a great many novels, and she knew that these were the sentiments generally attributed to a heroine, and she was determined that there should be nothing in her mind which she would not have the courage to say.

"I hope we shall not be so very tiresome to you," said Mrs. Eagles, with an involuntary glance at the other. "We hear you have been in Paris, Mrs. Curtis. You must have enjoyed that. It is always so bright and gay."

"I did not think it was gay at all," said Nancy; "a very stupid place. Everybody talked so queerly, not at all like the French one learns at school; and they have such queer dishes, and altogether they are so queer. Have you been in Paris? I did not find it at all gay."

"There are so many things to see," Mrs. Eagles suggested.

"Oh, what sort of things to see? Places where things have happened that nobody knows anything about, or if one ever heard of them one has forgotten. I don't call that amusing," said Nancy. "There are very handsome shops, but I did not care much for French taste, do you? they are so fond of dingy colors; nothing clean-looking nor bright. I was so glad to get back to England!"

"So was I," said the curate's wife, "when we were abroad; but I thought it all *so* interesting. I did enjoy it when we were there. The very names of the places that one had read about in history!"

"I never read history," said Nancy, carelessly. "I like to see things happening now; and nothing seemed to happen, but just hearing about old dusty rubbish. Oh yes, the streets were nice. Arthur says that in summer there are races, and amusements, and concerts out-of-doors, and all that sort of thing; but it was too cold when we were there. I went to hear the men speaking in Parliament, but it was dull. What is the good of listening to long speeches? One of Arthur's friends took us—Sir John Denham—you may have heard of him. He was always offering us boxes for the theatre, but that was dull too."

"I am afraid you were difficult to please," said Mrs. Eagles; but the curate's wife began to listen with a certain interest. It is always pleasant to hear familiarly about the Sir Johns of this world.

"Yes, they all said I was difficult to please," said Nancy, sweeping out of the chair she had just chosen, and nearly knocking down a small table on which stood a lamp. "Did you get your furniture from town, Mrs. Eagles? Did you have one of the tip-top upholsterers to do it, or did you pick up things cheap?"

"I am afraid we tried as much as we could to pick up things cheap," said Mrs. Eagles, restraining the inclination to laugh which was gaining upon her. The other young woman was listening anxiously, seeing no fun in it, and their entertainer thought she liked Mrs. Arthur best.

"I thought so," said Nancy, calmly, fixing her eyes upon an Italian cabinet which was the pride of the house; "but I should just put my house into the hands of some tip-top man. I don't like making up with part old and part new. *I shall have everything of the best* and the newest fashion," she said, looking round with a delightful glow of complaisant superiority. But then she was Sir John Curtis's daughter-in-law, and Mrs. Eagles was but a school-master's wife.

CHAPTER XXIX.

"PARTY! it was no party at all!" said Nancy. "I have just been giving Arthur a piece of my mind. If he thinks I am going to take the trouble to have a dress made, and go out among folks I don't know—to meet the curate and his wife! why, we are just as good as they are; or, rather, I should say, a deal better!" She was sitting over the fire, next morning, by no means pleased with her entertainment. Now, indeed, was the time when she felt it most—for it had been sweet to think of dazzling her mother and sisters with an account of the grand ladies of the green; and there was nothing now to comment upon, save poor little Mrs. Curate in her muslin frock! Arthur was in the room behind, shut off with folding-doors from this; and she spoke loud that he might have the benefit of her remarks.

"The curate!" said Mrs. Bates. "My dear, it's no compliment, it's an insult to ask you; as if you are not good enough to meet the best!"

"That is just what I said. I tell Arthur, if he were to stick up for me as he ought, nobody would dare to treat me like that. I consider," said Nancy, "that we paid those Eagleses a great compliment going: and to meet the curate! as if we were not good enough to sit down with the finest folks in this wretched little hole of a place!"

"The curate is a very nice young man," said Sarah Jane. "I should not mind him a bit. *I* call him handsome; but, then, he's married," she added, with lessened satisfaction. "And so are you married, so it comes to the same thing. I dare say they thought, as you were both young couples—"

"I wish you would think a little what you're saying," said Nancy. "Me! and her! a bit of a girl in white muslin! with a hundred and fifty a year, at the outside, to live on, and obliged to work hard among the poor, as hard as if she was a curate too—and me!"

"Yes, indeed, there is no comparison," said Mrs. Bates. "For shame, Sarah Jane! But, Nancy, you mustn't forget that your sister has chosen her lot very different. John Raisins is an excellent young man; but he can't open the doors of high life to her, as Arthur can open them to you. And it's best that she should make up her mind to what she can have—not hanker after what she can't. It's very different, my darling child, with you."

"I am sure I don't know if it's different," said Nancy. "He hasn't opened many doors to me yet, and I think he'd shut your door if he could, which is the only one that's left. Oh, why do girls marry! They are a deal better, if they could only think it, at home!" And with this Nancy began to cry.

Arthur heard everything in the next room. He had himself felt the change in his position sorely on the previous night; and Mr. Eagles's sharp yet somewhat mournful adjurations to him not to lose his time, to go on with his work, to

do something, had intensified the effect. He had come up-stairs early enough to hear the style of Nancy's conversation with the two ladies, and this also had touched him deeply.

What is more painful than to see those whom we love giving what, to our eyes, is a false representation of themselves to the outside world, which does not know them? Arthur felt this tingle to his very finger-points—a painful shame; her foolish rudeness, and the wrong which she did herself by this misrepresentation had made him miserable. If they could but see her as he knew her—as she was on other occasions! This, he said to himself, was not Nancy; it was a foolish braggart of the village, the type of the Bates family, not his wife, who was as much above the Bateses in fine taste and perception as she was in beauty. To be sure, her taste had not lately told for very much. But that had been the influence of the uncomfortable position in which she had felt herself, or of her connections, whom she had so unfortunately insisted on coming back to.

The pain had been exquisite with which Arthur watched his bride through this first appearance in society. It brought back to him the feelings, which he had tried to forget, with which he had come in upon the violent termination of her interview with Mrs. Anthony Curtis. Was there nothing he could do or say which would persuade her that this was not the way to meet strangers who might turn out to be friends? He was sitting unhappy enough over his fire, having taken out a book or two, which lay on the table beside the *Times*, the usual occupation of his aimless morning. He had been trying to "read" as Mr. Eagles understood reading; but what were Demosthenes and Cicero to him? He could not go back now, and toil over the intricacies of language and argument which wanted all his attention ceaselessly, with happy ease of mind, not with painful preoccupation of it, as he had pursued those studies in their earlier stages. He had never been a hard student, and why should he read now? What good would it do him? Would all the reading in the world, or his degree, when he had taken it, restore him to the world in which his wife could not accompany him, and would not try to accompany him, and where he could not go without her?

He had been sitting dreamily over the fire, thinking it all over. The vague plan in his mind had been, when Nancy was a little better prepared for it, a little more likely to incline in her own mind towards it, and willing to try to make the experiment successful, to take her home and present her to his father and mother, hoping that the surprise and the pleasure of his own return might procure them a welcome; this is what he had thought of even when he had written formal letters to Sir John, and those brief notes to Lucy or his mother, in which there was no reference to Nancy. When he could get her guided to that point—when he could feel that she could bear the trial, then to go.

It had been his hope all through, a something vaguely looked forward to, though never brought down to any settled moment of time. But, alas! it had receded before him point by point. Nancy was not willing to do anything to please. She was of opinion that by herself, without any effort, she ought to *rule easily* over a subject world. She felt herself, not, as he did, to be upon the painful threshold of an unexplored country, full of perils, in which all her efforts were needed to find herself a place, but rather to have conquered all that could be put in her way, and attained every object, with the exception of the homage of those "stuck-up" and disagreeable people, who were envious of her, and therefore would not pay her the attention to which she had a right, and whom Nancy would scorn to do anything to conciliate.

What a difference between their points of view! And he who ought to have been the strongest, who was infinitely better educated and more reasonable than Nancy, he was powerless to convey any other conviction to her mind; although she succeeded in agitating his with all sorts of tumults—with shame that she should show her worse qualities, and earn the disapproval she incurred, yet with hot resentment towards those who disapproved of her. Such sentiments are not unusual in human bosoms. Husbands feel so for their wives, and wives for their husbands, and parents for their children. Why will they show themselves at their worst, to make strangers laugh, or wonder, or despise? and at the same time, how do they dare, these strangers, to despise, or laugh, or wonder? A more painful conflict of feeling cannot be.

This was what Arthur was thinking, sitting drearily, not among the ruins of his domestic happiness, but before the sunny, commonplace, too trimly new and flimsy altar of those capricious deities who rule the hearth. He had not yet been six months married; but how the bloom had gone off all his hopes, and with how little confidence he regarded the future, which once had seemed to him so bright! And as he sat there, with his books thrown down at his elbow, and the *Times* thrust away from him upon the table, with a sort of loathing in his mind both of the studies which could now, he thought, do him no good if he returned to them, and of the public life, once certain, which now seemed to have become impossible and undesirable, he heard Mrs. Bates and Sarah Jane come in, and the conversation that followed.

Even now Arthur had sense enough (and it was creditable to him) to throw himself into no vulgar vituperation of his mother-in-law. The woman was well enough; she was kind, and almost fierce in independence, taking nothing from him, giving, not receiving, hospitality, and in no way disposed to encourage his wife in anything disagreeable to him. It was not Mrs. Bates that was in fault, but Nancy herself—she who had seemed to him such a lily of grace and sweetness among all these commonplace people. She was so still, he believed; she was not like them, who were natural to their sphere, and suggested nothing better. He was faithful, notwithstanding all imperfections, to his first ideal of her; but her words thrilled through and through him, scarring him as with burning arrows. "He had not opened any doors to her. Oh, why did girls marry!" Was this what his wife asked, after five months of marriage with him? Arthur's veins seemed to fill full, as if some essence of pain had been poured into them. He darted up, overcome by sharp misery and shame, and a passionate resentment which he could not restrain. It took him but a moment to throw open the folding-

doors. If one minute more had elapsed, it would have brought a second thought; but there was no interval in which this was possible. He threw open the door and stood looking at her, for the moment too tremulous and agitated to speak. She had put shame upon him before those women who were the only visitors she cared for. When she saw him, Nancy jumped up too and confronted him.

"Well?" she said, loudly, with a sharp and tremulous voice of interrogation. What had he to say for himself? She had said nothing which she was not ready to stand to, which she would not defend with all her powers. No one had ever known Nancy to flinch. However hot and hasty had been her assertions, however lightly said, she had always stood up for them; and to such a palpable challenge and trumpet-call to conflict it was not likely she would give in now.

He stood and looked at her for a moment, almost wavering. It was not the first time she had said such things; why should he resent it so much more than usual?

"Did you mean that?" he said. "Do you really think that I have closed doors, but opened none, and that girls would not marry if they knew—"

"I said it, therefore I must have meant it!" cried Nancy, with a flush of angry red. "If you sit and listen to what women are saying! But I never say anything I will not stand to. Yes: what door have you opened to me, Arthur? It was mother's door first. Not your father and mother's, which was the first to be thought of, nor any of your friends'; but mother's has always been open to you."

"Oh, hush, hush!" cried Mrs. Bates. "Oh, children, you don't know what you're doing! Why should you quarrel? Nancy, hold your tongue—you'll be sorry after that you ever said a word!"

"Not I!" cried Nancy. "I am not one to bottle things up. I'll say it out plain before you both, and you can be my witness, mother. When I knew Arthur first, I never thought what he was: gentleman or poor man, it was all one to me. He was my fancy, and that was all I thought of. When that man came, that Durant, then I began to see what I was bringing on me; but it was too late to draw back. And I said to myself, I'd let him see it wasn't his money I wanted, and that I'd never kootoo to one of his grand friends. And I never have," she cried, with angry energy, "and I never will! You've opened no doors to me—nor I don't want you to; but you sha'n't think that it's been a grand thing for me to marry you, neither you nor any one belonging to you. It hasn't. You'd separate me from my own people if you could, and you don't give me any other; and I say again, if girls only knew—"

"Mrs. Bates," said Arthur, with trembling lips, "I do not think I have tried to separate your daughter from you. I may defend myself so far as this; and I had hoped that some time or other she would have gone with me to knock at that door which you upbraid me with not having opened. But what am I to do if, as she tells you, she never will? She never has shown the slightest inclination to do so, that is the truth indeed."

"*It was them that should have* come to her—that's what she thinks," said Mrs. Bates, "and she's hot-tempered. You know she's hot-tempered. She don't mean half of what she says. Oh, don't now, don't quarrel, children!" cried the mother. In the *mêlée*, Sarah Jane thought she might as well take a part too.

"I don't wonder that Nancy was affronted. That stuck-up Miss Curtis coming with her 'dear Arthurs,' and her 'dear brothers,' and taking no notice, no more than if we were cabbages, of us; but as for Nancy not thinking of who he was, and that it was a grand marriage, oh, didn't she just? You may tell that to those that will believe it—you had better not tell it to me!"

"You nasty, spiteful, tale-telling, disagreeable thing!" cried Nancy, furious, turning upon her sister, who laughed in her face, and ran round in fright, which was half real, half pretended, to the other side of the round table. Arthur stood aghast while this playful episode, so much out of keeping with his feelings, went on. It was out of keeping to Nancy too. No smile came upon her face. "I thought it was a great marriage I was making, if you please," she said, after she too had paused with the sense of a crisis, and stared at her sister's pretended sportiveness. No smile relaxed the lips of either of the contending pair. "I thought so, you may say it. I thought I should be a lady, and mix with the best in the land. What's come of it? Have I ever set foot among the folks you belong to, or their kind? No; I said the truth, there's no door been open to me—the other way! You would shut mother's door upon me if you could; you would keep me away from my own folks—the only friends I have. But you'll never do it, Arthur; you may as well give it up at once. I'll stick to them that's good to me, and I won't stir a step to court your people, nor to curry favor—no, not if you would ask me on your knees. I wrote to my lady because I promised, but my lady wouldn't make much of my letter; and never will I make myself so cheap again, never, if I should live hundreds of years!"

"Nancy, Nancy, my child!" cried her mother, "you must not make rash vows. You don't know what you'll do till the time comes. She's hot-tempered—that's all about it. And if Arthur will say he is sorry—"

"What shall I say I am sorry for, Mrs. Bates?"

"Oh, now this is too bad! Don't you see it will please her? She always was a bit unreasonable and high-tempered. You can't help your temper; it's a thing that's born with you. Say you're sorry, and smooth her down a little, and she'll soon come round and promise anything you like. I know my Nancy. She is hot-headed, and she's contrairy, but her heart's in the right place," said the mother. Mrs. Bates was frightened by the contraction in Arthur's face.

"I have nothing to be sorry for," he said. "I have made no accusations against any one; but I cannot always give in. I have come here to please her, and she is not pleased. Let us go away. Let Nancy second me in my attempt to get back into a natural life. It is not natural that I should be cooped up here doing nothing, wasting my time. I must get out of it somehow. Either you will go with me, Nancy, or I must go alone. I cannot go on in this way any longer."

"You sha'n't, then!" she cried, with redoubled heat. "Go, wherever you like, for me! Oh yes, go back to your family that you're so fond of! You and your friends do nothing but despise me—even a bit of a school-master's wife! Don't hold me, don't keep me back, mamma! I'll not be left, whatever happens; it's me that will go, and he can do what he pleases. Don't, I tell you! Nobody shall hold me, nobody shall keep me in one place rather than another against my will. But I sha'n't stay to be forsaken. Oh, don't think it, Arthur! It's me that will go."

"I have said nothing about forsaking you," he said; but he was wearied out with such struggles, and he made no appeal to her to stay. This decided Nancy. She rushed impetuously from the room, leaving them all staring at each other without giving a word of explanation. Mrs. Bates, whose face was somewhat blank, called to Sarah Jane to follow her sister, and herself turned to Arthur with an attempt at a smile.

"It will soon be over now," she said. "You mustn't be hard upon her, Arthur. For all we know, there may be something working with her that she can't resist. Young women have queer ways, and you can't tell what's the cause of it till after. Don't you mind; go back to your books, there's a dear, and take no notice. She'll have a good cry, and she'll come to herself, and you mustn't mind."

It was not this address that quieted him; but what could he do? The position was so impossible that he was glad to withdraw from it. It was worse than ever, now that one of these altercations had taken place before witnesses; he went back sadly to his fire and sat down again, blaming himself for the exasperation which had made him speak. Probably Mrs. Bates was right, and it was all over. She might come down-stairs looking as if nothing had happened, or she might come down penitent, as she sometimes did; and this got the better of him at once. But, anyhow, he would not insist upon continuing the altercation; he was too glad that it was over.

He sat down, sighing, and drearily drew towards him the Demosthenes that lay on the table. How unimportant all that dead eloquence was, side by side with living passion! The petty stir of domestic dissensions was too near to let him hear the ring of the old disputations, the flow and flood of the old eloquence. Nancy's voice, in all the warmth of passion, rung more clear on the ear than the greatest of orators. He sat with his nerves all thrilling, and his mind vainly striving to get a little instruction through his eyes. Those eyes read easily enough, hot though they were with the strain they had been subjected to, but the mind received no impression. It was more busy in his ears, listening to what was going on.

He heard the hasty sound of Nancy's footstep up-stairs; then he heard her come down, and there were voices in the little hall, confused and undertoned, one voice mingled with another; and then there was the sound of the hall-door closing. He sat after this with a strange sensation, as if that sound of the door had jarred him in every limb. He did not seem able to move to see what it was. But the stillness that fell upon the little house was ominous. Instead of the excited voices which had been audible a little while ago, filling the place with contention, what a strange, deadly sort of quiet!

Arthur was wearied out. So many vicissitudes of feeling had not occurred in all his previous life as had come to him within these five months past—happiness, delight, disappointment, vexation, irritated nerves, wounded affection, mortified pride, and that combination of impassioned love and disenchanted vision which is of all things in the world the hardest to bear. How different, how different from his anticipations! How lightly the lovers' quarrels had gone off, quenched in tears and smiles, and mutual confessions and warmer fondness. "The falling-out of faithful friends renewing is of love." But, then, that must not go too far, or continue too long; and the shiver of hot shame which she had brought over him so often, the uncertainty as to how she would acquit herself which was always present, the passionate mortification with which he had seen other people's smiles or heard other people's comments, all these were very different from the lovers' quarrels.

He held his Demosthenes steadily in his hand and attempted to read. How far off it was! and the other so near; and of all the things that can occupy a man's ear, what is so absorbing as the dead silence of vacancy after a struggle which has threatened everything, and had ended in—what? Nothing, silence, vacancy, probably bringing no consequence at all.

Nancy did not come in at the hour of luncheon. He waited for her, refusing that refreshment until it was clear she did not mean to come back. Then he swallowed a glass of wine hastily, and prepared in his turn to go out—not to seek her. He was resolved that this time, at least, she should be left in tranquillity, left to do what pleased her best. He had just gone into the hall to get his hat when some one came to the door. How his heart jumped! and how sick it grew again when it turned out to be only Mr. Eagles, who had come to make a serious remonstrance!

"You oughtn't to lose your time," the "coach" said, bending his brows. "If you can't do anything better, you should come back to me. The old set are still hard at work, and there are two or three new men that will make their mark. It can't be lively here, doing nothing. Why, you've nothing to do, not even fishing or foot-ball, eh? I never hear of you playing foot-ball. What do you do?"

"Nothing," said Arthur; "and I can't say I like it; but what's the good? I am too old for foot-ball and that sort of thing."

"Ah, four-and-twenty, that's a great age; but I know what you mean. Married! there's the rub—feel yourself too grand for it. But look here, Curtis—a man can't live with nothing to do."

"The wonder to me is how long a man can live with nothing to do," said Arthur. "But as I say, what's the good? I'm too old now to care about my degree. What does it matter, one way or the other? I have got beyond that stage."

"Married, again!" said Mr. Eagles: "that is what drives me wild—not the fact, which is harmless enough; but, Lord, how grand you all think yourselves! However, it don't last. You can't feed upon strawberries-and-cream all your lives,

my dear fellow. You must buckle to at something, or you will be nobody. I don't like any one who has passed through my hands to be nobody. You had better read, Curtis, you had better read."

"Yes," said Arthur, vaguely.

He was quite willing to pledge himself to anything so long as Mr. Eagles would but go away, and leave him to listen and make sure if any one came; or get out into the air and distract his mind from listening. One or the other, he felt, he must do.

"The best thing will be to come back to me," said Mr. Eagles; "at least you won't lose your time completely, and you'll find it a relief. Too many sweets will pall upon you; take them in measure, and they are delightful enough. Come, Curtis, I make you an offer. I needn't say, for you know, that I don't require to go hunting for pupils; but, my good fellow, for your own sake you had better come back."

"Yes," said Arthur, with a sudden lightening and ease which diffused itself all over him. There was another sound at the door; and this time it must, there could be no doubt, be Nancy. This relief made it possible for him to listen. His countenance cleared. He had not really known what his fears were, but he felt the vague greatness of them in this sense of immediate ease and relief.

But all the blood rushed to his head again, and the pulses began to beat in his brow when the door opened, and not Nancy appeared, but the maid, showing in the unexpected and, in the circumstances, alarming figure of Durant.

CHAPTER XXX.

"THERE is something wrong at home!" This most natural of all the ideas with which foreboding human nature sees a sudden arrival, sprung to Arthur's lips almost in spite of himself. He was already so torn by anxiety and alarm that it seemed perfectly appropriate that other griefs should come to distract him, and he scarcely understood the eager "No" with which Durant replied. It was not till they were seated together, one at each side of the fire—Mr. Eagles having taken his departure—that Arthur realized that the burning confusion and pain in his head arose from the fact that his wife had gone out in a fit of passion a few hours ago and had not yet come back—not so very serious a matter—and was not owing to any suddenly-heard-of calamity at home.

"No, things are all well, but I have something to say to you, Arthur," said Durant. And he began a long commission, which Arthur heard vaguely and did not understand. It was to the effect that the post of attaché to a foreign embassy which the young man had wished for was open to him, and this was coupled with overtures from the parents whose hearts were yearning over Arthur. Probably there is, after all, nothing so well calculated as long silence to wear out the indignation and resentment of fathers and mothers. However hot these may be at first, the blank misery of knowing nothing about a child beloved damps and quenches the ardor of offence, *and in a great many cases* the cruel son or daughter has his or her will out of the sheer intolerableness of this break, and anxiety of the tender hearts on whom this unfeeling passiveness tells more severely than any more actively offensive treatment. This had been working for all these months at Oakley. Hearing nothing! it was almost worse than death, of which this miserable certainty that we shall hear no more of those we have lost is the greatest bitterness—tempered, however, with the counterbalancing certainty which alone makes us capable of bearing it, that human events are over to them, and that none of the calamities with which we are familiar can happen to those who are beyond the veil.

But the Curtises knew that anything or everything might be happening to Arthur, while they had no news of him, and were as ignorant of all his ways as if he had been dead. And when the information came of this vacancy which he had desired so much, the opportunity was not to be resisted. They had said nothing about it to each other for twenty-four hours, and then had burst forth the universal feeling. Let him accept this, and let him come home and bring his wife, if no better might be. She had been insolent, what did it matter? She was the price that must be paid for Arthur; and the moment it became possible to have Arthur, they all felt that they were too ready to pay any price.

Lady Curtis had telegraphed for Durant when the general conviction burst forth, and the household at Oakley were now full of excitement, already beginning to prepare rooms for Arthur and his wife, and forgetting all other feelings in the pleasure of seeing their boy again. Durant had lost no time. He was too faithful a friend to consider that Arthur had all but repulsed his friendly offices after the marriage, and that not a word of recollection had reached him from Underhayes during the entire winter. He went down to Oakley at once to receive his commission, and here he was with full credentials. The father and mother made no conditions. If Arthur accepted this appointment, which was the best thing he could do, let him come home and bring his wife. That was all. And it may be supposed that Durant, feeling himself the bearer of proposals both generous and tender, was startled and affronted by the confused and preoccupied way in which Arthur seemed to listen, not understanding him, starting at every sound outside, continually disturbed, and with a look of nervous agitation which had evidently nothing to do with the question in hand.

"Do you not understand me?" he cried at last, indignant; and then the rising excitement in Arthur's mind burst forth.

"Durant, my wife has gone away to her mother's. I—I can't answer all at once."

"What do you mean, Arthur? How disturbed you look! Has anything happened?" cried Durant. Arthur made an effort to recover himself. He laughed tremulously.

"You know me, Lewis," he said; "I am a—nervous sort of fellow, though I don't look it, perhaps."

"I know. There *is* something the matter, Arthur. What is it? Is your wife ill? What has happened?"

"Well—nothing has happened. I have been living rather a solitary life, and one gets irritable, and easily put out."

"You have had a—difficulty, as the Americans call it—a lovers' quarrel," said Durant, with a laugh which was far from according with his feelings.

"That is just it. No, not a lovers' quarrel, but a difficulty. We see things from different points of view; and I don't know how she will like this: I must wait. I cannot decide until I know."

"Arthur, it is all very well, all very right to consult your wife; but you can't think of neglecting such an opportunity. It is altogether unconditional. They will receive her as if she were a duke's daughter; you know, when once they have made up their minds to it, there will be no stint, she will have no reason to complain of her reception."

Arthur's head was turned to the door.

"You will think me silly," he said; "a fool, but I cannot help it. One thing I will tell you, Durant; I will go to Vienna. I don't think it's too late; five months is not long enough, at my age, to put a man out altogether, is it? But as for Nancy, I can't answer. If she will go with me home, if she will go with me to Vienna, I can't tell you. We must see her first. She is at her mother's—"

"You don't mean to say that she has left you, Arthur?"

"Oh no, no," he said; "that is rather too absurd—the most ridiculous idea! Come along, Durant, let us get out and stretch our legs. I have not had a real walk for ages. Of course, as it's Saturday, you are going to stay till Monday? That is right, that is a true pleasure. She is at—her mother's," he added, changing the subject abruptly, and dropping his voice.

What did it mean? Durant could not tell. He had not disliked Nancy; though she had defied him too, it had been done in a way which did not offend the young man. He had admired her, even when she attacked himself personally; and he had been inclined to think, as Arthur did, that she was a lily among those weeds. He had not been surprised at his friend's infatuation. He had thought her a beautiful, high-spirited girl, full of a generous if over-vehement disdain for the conventional judgment that made her appear an unfit wife for a man of worldly position superior to her own. Her threat to give up her lover, and her counter-decision to marry him disinherited, in order to show his friends how little she cared about his money, were fresh in his mind. And he had liked Nancy: though he had been formally on the other side as Lady Curtis's agent, he had never really been unfriendly: he remembered well his old difficulties when he had tried to persuade Arthur to relinquish his faith to this girl who trusted in him, and with what a sense of relief he had found that all his arguments were vain, and Arthur's honor and love invulnerable. He was mystified and perplexed, as well as grieved, by Arthur's painful preoccupation now, not knowing what could have happened. They went out in the teeth of the March wind, which blew sharp and keen along the suburban roads.

"I have not had anything to call a walk for weeks," Arthur said, with a feverish look of eagerness, as they reached the fresh breadth of the common, with the green fields and country paths beyond. The hedge-rows were bristling with buds, the skies softly blue, where they could be seen through the masses of cloud that swept across the great vault overhead. The young man sped along like a loosened greyhound, and his friend, fresh from the confinement of town, had hard ado to follow him. He talked little as he went along. Was he walking so fast to escape some care that weighed upon him? If it was not for that, there was no other motive, for the walk was without any object. Now and then he would break forth for a moment about this prospect which Durant had come to offer him. "It would be the best thing," he would say, "far the best thing. I must get rid of this, one way or other." Then he would be silent, and after a mile or so say to himself again, "Yes, *this* will not do—I must go, it is plain. Going may be salvation." Durant did not know what irrepressible cares were plucking at his friend's skirts and compelling him to these resolutions; and he himself talked calmly of Oakley, of the desires of the family there, and the haste they were in to send him off upon his mission, and all the anticipations of Arthur's return which they had already begun to entertain. At this Arthur did nothing but shake his head. "Will *she* consent?" he said, once. Would Nancy consent? was that what he meant? Consent! What excuse could she have not to consent? They walked far, at a great pace, and Durant was almost worn out. He lagged behind his friend as he approached the house. It was still all dark, one faint gleam of fire-light in the drawing-room contending feebly with the gray of the twilight; no one at the window looking out for them, no lamp lighted. "Has Mrs. Curtis returned?" Arthur asked of the maid, as they went on, and was answered No. They went into her part of the house, the white little drawing-room, where indeed there were no pretty signs of Nancy's presence, no work or books to mar the trimness of the place, but all the chairs set against the wall, and the fire flickering dimly in the grate. And the dinner-hour came without any appearance of Nancy. Arthur got more and more agitated as the time went on, and Durant more and more surprised.

"Is your wife dining out?" he said, when he found they were about to sit down at the table without her. Arthur made no distinct answer; he said, after a while, as if he had then heard the question for the first time, "She is at her mother's." He did not change his dress before dinner, or show any recollection of the need of such preliminaries, but sat over the fire, vaguely replying now and then when his friend spoke to him, and starting at every sound.

"Shall you not wait for Mrs. Curtis?" Durant said, as Arthur took him into the little dining-room.

"She is at her mother's," was all Arthur replied. Altogether it was very mysterious, and Durant could not but feel that there was mischief in the air.

At last, when the clock had struck ten, and there was no appearance of Nancy, Arthur sprung to his feet. "I must go and fetch her," he said; "this will never do—this will never do!" Durant took his hat mechanically also, and they walked out without another word into the windy night. The sky looked widened and enlarged by the boisterous breeze which drove mass after

mass of clouds across the blue, and across the face of the waning moon, which shone out at intervals only to be swallowed up again by those floating vapors. There was a certain hurry, and coldness and agitation in the night.

The way from Rose Villas into the lighted street of Underhayes was dark, and the alternations of gloom and light in the sky made the vision uncertain. Durant could see how anxiously his friend peered at all the figures they met on the darkling road; but Nancy was not on her way home. They went on in silence to the street which Durant remembered perfectly, and to the door, at which Arthur left him standing as he went in. He had stood there before, and heard the voices in the parlor when he came here first in search of Arthur: how strange, to come here now in search of Arthur's runaway wife! for this was what it seemed to be now. He could hear the silence which followed Arthur's entrance—a pause which was impressive from the confusion of voices that had been audible before. "I have come for Nancy," he heard him say.

Arthur had gone in without any question. He had left his friend at the door, neither thinking nor caring that some revelation might be made which it was better Durant should not hear. He steadied his own countenance, not to look angry or anxious. "Are you ready?" he said, addressing his wife; "I did not think you meant to stay so long."

"You have not given yourself much trouble to look after me," said Nancy. "No, I am not ready. I don't mean to go!"

"What does she mean?" he said, with a tremble in his voice, turning to Mrs. Bates.

"Oh, Arthur, I don't know what she means. She is as hot-tempered and as contrairy as possible. She takes up things quite wrong. You never meant to drive her away, did you? You had not thought of leaving her — tell her, for Heaven's sake! She will not listen to me."

There was no one in the parlor but Mrs. Bates and Sarah Jane. It was a night when the tax-collector was busy adding up one of his lists of defaulters, and it was the same party which had witnessed the dispute of the morning which was assembled now. That was one reason of the sudden quiet; the other was, the awe and horror that had come over the family at Nancy's obstinate resolution to stay at home and return to her husband no more—a resolution which he had divined, and which had weighed on him for the whole day.

"I—leave her!" said Arthur, "what did I say that looked like leaving her? Nancy, come home. I have been very unhappy, not knowing why you stayed away from me, and now I have something to consult you about. Come home."

"I am at home," said Nancy, sullenly. "It is no use talking. I have taken my resolution. Go away, Arthur, as you said; I mean to stay here."

"What does she mean?" he cried, in dismay.

"Oh, I mean what I say! You told me you were going. You said I might come if I pleased —I, who hate strangers—I, after all the slights you've brought upon me! but that anyhow you were going. I've left for good and all. Mother *can go and pack up the* things, and dismiss the *servants, and leave you free; but* one word's enough to me, Arthur: you shall never have occasion to say another. I don't budge from here unless mother turns me out. And as soon as you please you can go."

They all looked at each other—the others pale, Nancy red with excitement and passion.

"You don't mean this, Nancy!" Arthur said. "You cannot mean, for a hasty word, to forsake me; it is not possible! A hasty word! how many have you said to me! Come, come, you are angry; but how little there is to be angry about! We have had more serious discussions before," he added, with a faint smile, "and you have said much worse things to me."

"It does not matter what I said, but what you said. No, Arthur, you may put up with whatever you like; but I won't put up with it!" she said, in all the unreasonableness of passion. "You might think it didn't matter what I say; but I think it does matter what you say. No, I am not going back. You may talk till you're sick—it won't make any difference to me."

"Nancy, don't be such a fool!" said Sarah Jane. "Why, only think how people will talk! Not six months married, and coming back home! And after all the fuss that was made about your marrying, and the grand catch we fancied it was. When you come to think of it, you can't be such a fool!"

"Nancy—Nancy, my dear, you're unreasonable! indeed you're unreasonable, when Arthur says he did not mean it."

"Nancy!" cried the young man, "why do you torment me like this? What have I done to you? You make my life a constant contention. We never have a quiet moment. Have I failed in love to you? Have I not thought of you in everything? You will drive me mad, I think. Have I ever neglected you, or injured you?"

"You said you would leave me," said Nancy; "that's enough—I told you at the time. Oh! never a man in this world shall say that he has forsaken *me!* I am not one that will be forsaken. Go, Arthur, go where you please. I shall stay here."

"Nancy, Lewis Durant is at the door. He has brought a message of the greatest importance from Oakley."

"Lewis Durant!"—she started to her feet with fresh impetuosity—"that was all that was wanted. Do you think I will stay behind to see Lewis Durant—to let him spy and tell my lady. No, mamma, no! That's decided me. Good-night to you all. You may do what you please—but here I'll stay!"

And Nancy darted out of the midst of them, quick as thought, while they all stood stupefied, and rushed out of the room and up-stairs, where, as they listened, they heard her quick steps overhead thrilling through the little house, and the quick closing and locking of the door.

The shock affected the three in different ways. Sarah Jane began to cry. Mrs. Bates, trembling, went up to Arthur and caught him by the arm. This strange, terrible incident changed him from her son-in-law, with whom she was familiar, into her daughter's judge, before whom she trembled.

"Oh, Mr. Curtis, Mr. Curtis!" she said, "the girl's wild and out of her senses. Don't think too badly of her. It's like a madness. Oh, forgive her!" The mother was in too deadly earnest to be able for tears.

"What am I to do?" said Arthur, overcome, with a gasp as if for breath.

"Oh, my dear, my dear! leave her. She is out of her senses, she is out of her senses, she is out of her mind! Leave her to me, and I'll bring her to you to-morrow to beg your pardon. I will, Arthur, if anything in this world can do it," Mrs. Bates said, clasping her hands.

"There is nothing else to be done," said Arthur. He was as pale as death. He seemed to get his breath with difficulty as he stood there, struck with wonder, paralyzed with the sense of impotence in his mind, and the dire injury that had been done him. A friend may leave a friend, or even a child a parent; but when a wife, a six months' bride, leaves her husband even for a day, even in the house of her father, it is as if some horrible convulsion had happened which turns the world upside-down. He said nothing more to any one, but went out, and caught at Durant's arm to support him, and walked home under the flying clouds, through the stormy, agitated night. The night was like his mind—swept by wild thoughts, overclouded by profound glooms. He scarcely said anything to Durant, who seemed to divine all that happened, though nothing was said to him. It was well he was there. When they went back to the villa, the poor little villa, which was at once so desolate and so meaningless without Nancy, the young man gave a heavy groan, which seemed to echo through the mean little rooms. Could anything change this fact — any coming back again, any penitence? His wife had forsaken him—Nancy had gone back to her mother's. It might be only for a night, but could anything change the fact? His life had come to a stop; no making-up could alter that. As he had been even this morning, he could never be again any more.

It was Durant who told that little falsehood to the servants about why their mistress stayed away. She was not well, he said, and they need not wait up, as it was doubtful whether she would come home. And he stayed by Arthur through the long dull hours, hearing in breaks and snatches something of the story which poor Arthur felt was now over: how they had lived together, and how, according to all he could tell, they had parted. When the flood-tides were opened, it relieved Arthur to speak. He showed his friend, in his despair, all that was in his heart, his love for Nancy, which was ready to forgive everything, and yet the wounds which she had given to him.

"It is not her fault," he said. "It is the want of training. She has never realized it, what she married for. She thinks it was only to be happy, to be loved and flattered, to have everything happy round her." This the poor young fellow said as if it were the best excuse in the world. "That is how she has been brought up. It is not her fault. She has not considered me, nor that there is a duty; and was I to be the one to remind her of her duty, Durant? I did not want her to love me because it was her duty. I wanted her to do her duty because of her love," said Arthur, unconsciously antithetical. Durant listened to everything, and made few comments. If he said anything in sympathy for his friend which meant condemnation of Nancy, Arthur *rose up and* stopped him. "How can you tell how she was aggravated?" he said. It was not till the middle of the night that Durant could persuade him to go to bed; and by that time the desolateness of the dreary little house without Nancy, which had no soul or meaning but Nancy, struck Lewis almost as much as it did Arthur — poor little miserable shell of a place, which had outgrown its sense and its use!

Next day was a busy but a miserable day. Durant was at the Bateses' little house as soon as it was opened in the morning, hoping that his eloquence might be more effectual than that of the poor young husband, and that he might be able, through her mother, to induce Nancy to come back. He found Mrs. Bates very anxious and tearful, very well disposed, but powerless. He gave her a hint of the proposal he had brought from Oakley, and of the unconditional surrender of the Curtises, which the mother carried to her daughter up-stairs, but without any favorable issue. Later he came back with Arthur. Nancy kept up-stairs; she would not show; and all the household were against her.

"I never held with it," said the tax-collector: "I told my wife so from the first. I never hold with a young woman complaining of her husband. Mrs. Bates is too kind a mother, that's what it is."

These things penetrated into Arthur's heart almost unawares: that his wife had complained of him all through; that there had been talk of the advantages of the marriage, and Nancy had hoped to be well off, and to make a great match, and had married him with that view. All these things sunk into his heart. Was this true, or was it all the truth? It cannot be said that he believed it, yet it acted upon him as if he had believed, bringing a mingled pain and bitterness against which at this moment he was incapable of struggling. All that day long they kept coming and going, pleading with her to return; but when another night came, and the slow hours dragged through with the same excitements as before—without her, or hope of her—all sense of possible renewal died out of their hasty young hearts, and the severance seemed complete.

CHAPTER XXXI.

It was like a dream when it was all over, so huddled up at the end, so seemingly causeless; the sudden outburst of accumulated dissatisfaction and failure breaking out in a moment — a storm out of a clear sky, as it were. There was no adequate reason for the catastrophe; greater troubles had been between them before, more violent disputes; perhaps it was that never before had there been any witnesses, nor had the menace ever before come from Arthur's side. When he left Underhayes, almost carried off by Durant, yet with many stings in his heart, which in time, at least, might slay the love that was still warm within him, Arthur could think of his married life only as a dream. Nancy had refused to see him. She would make no arrangement, listen to no terms, make no promises; indeed, she would not communicate with her husband or his friend except through her parents, and refused to say anything except that all was

over, that she never wanted to hear Arthur's name again.

The father and mother were without any question deeply distressed. Mrs. Bates was, on the whole, a sensible woman, who, though she might be disposed to back up her married daughter in a certain amount of folly and hot-headedness as to the honors and privileges which were "no more than what she had a right to," was yet horrified at the notion of practical divorce and disjunction such as this; and her husband not only shared this moral horror, but was profoundly excited by the idea of having his daughter, whom he had believed to be provided for, once more on his hands. All through that long Sunday, and for some days after, Durant did nothing but come and go between the two houses with proposals of all kinds. If Nancy would not return, would she join Arthur in London and go to Oakley with him? If she would not go to Oakley, would she go to Vienna, where they could make a fresh start, having both, it was to be hoped, learned a tremendous lesson? To all these suggestions Nancy answered No. She kept up-stairs, locking her door when her husband himself came. No, she would do nothing. She would not go to his friends to be despised. She would not go abroad with him to be miserable. He knew how she hated foreign countries. She would not go home to him, or see him to discuss these questions. He could go where he pleased; she would not put herself in his way. She would not shame him among his fine friends. Nobody should say she was a burden on her husband.

It is impossible to imagine anything more confused, more agitated, more feverish than the course of these painful days; but at last it became apparent even to Arthur that this could go on no longer. Many little indications of a state of things which he had never dreamed of, and which was fatal to the self-esteem which is in every man's bosom, worked on the poor young fellow's mind as much as the actual grievance of the moment. That he had been thought of as a good match was, perhaps, inevitable in the circumstances; but even that is not agreeable; and to know that your wife has gone to her father's house to complain of you is an offence which few men could easily forgive.

All this produced in Arthur's mind an impression of painful unreality in the past than which there is nothing more wounding, more bitter on earth. That love should fail and hearts change is bad enough; but that the love which you have believed in implicitly should never have existed at all, that your affection should have been regarded as a matter of worldly advantage, and your conduct discussed with others — what thought can sting more deeply? It destroyed not only Arthur's faith in his wife, but his faith in the life they had lived together. Hitherto it had been her too great sincerity, her incapacity for feigning, he thought, poor fellow, which had been their rock ahead. And now was all insincere, was all feigned from beginning to end? His head seemed to turn, and the giddy world to go round with him; and that wrath "which works like madness in the brain" — the wrath which is half love, and which feels every injury with twofold aggravation of resentment, yet yearning—took possession of his mind.

It was in this condition that he left Underhayes. Durant had made on Arthur's behalf the most careful arrangements for Nancy with her father. She was to retain the villa if she chose, and the half of the allowance Sir John gave to his son. Arthur would have given the whole, had that been possible. As it was, she would be well off, able to do as she pleased, according to her breeding, to help her family, to occupy an important position among them. The poor young fellow thought with bitterness that this would be more congenial to her than any elevation which could have reached her with him; and perhaps, indeed, there was some reason in this, for the elevations which could reach her as Arthur's wife were, in a sense, humiliations. Everybody in his rank looked upon her with wonder, with curiosity and suspicion, as on a creature of a different race. Her actions were scrutinized, her little imperfections noted, as they never would have been otherwise. Whereas, as the richest member of the family, the one standing above them all at once by nature and by position, the family goddess and beauty, and most successful member, Nancy was looked up to and adored. Perhaps it was not wonderful that a young creature with no sense of duty in her, who had expected merely, as Arthur said, to be made happy, flattered, courted, and caressed in her marriage, and to whom such disappointment had come, should prefer the position in which she could regain a little of the self-pride and complacency which was natural to her. The first blow which assails that complacency, how terrible it is! And Nancy had been beaten down, though she would not own it, by the sense of universal disapproval, by the failure even of her own confidence in herself.

And it would be impossible to describe the strange desolation and sense that all was over and ended, with which this self-willed and hot-headed girl woke to her misery on the morning after Arthur went away. The probation of the last few months had been very bad for Nancy. She was not altogether unworthy, as poor Arthur was inclined to think, of the higher opinion which had been formed of her; indeed, it was the finer element in her nature which had led her astray in the final strain and trial. She who had been the superior of her family, who had been raised to the poetic heaven of a young lover's adoration, had, after her marriage, plunged at once into a bottomless abyss of inferiority and humiliation. It had begun upon her wedding-day with the vision of Lucy, in whom her jealous, suddenly enlightened eyes had seen at a glance so many differences, so many refinements unknown to herself, and with Arthur's objection to her salmon-colored dress. Then her ignorance, her want even of the most elementary acquaintance with the world he was familiar with, was brought home to the alarmed, resentful girl on every side of her.

The more she found herself wanting, the hotter had risen that suppressed fury in her heart against herself, her belongings, her breeding, and the new circumstances which brought out all their deficiencies. Pride first, and the vanity of flattered and self-admiring youth, had risen wildly against the apparent need of improvement, of education and culture, which alone would have fitted her to be Arthur's wife; and if she rejected

with proud disgust and self-assertion the idea of improvement in herself, what was there for it but to turn her back upon Arthur's world and drag him into her own, where she was at her ease, where she was still the first, whatever happened? This, however, had not contented Nancy's mind. She had been no more satisfied here than elsewhere. The mere fact of withdrawing her husband into this village atmosphere, which he supported patiently or impatiently according to the mood of the moment, but always with an effort, was in itself a confession of failure. She was unfit for the society of his equals; and he, was not he unfit for hers? None of these things had Nancy said to herself, but they were all surging within, pushing her on by their very tumult and unrest to ever more and more entire committal of herself to this foolish and wrong way.

Nobody knew better than she how foolish it was, and wrong; but the more the conviction grew, the more ungovernable was her determination to be stopped by no one, to yield to no one, to assert herself as everybody's equal or superior, claiming in her own right all the consideration that a princess could command. She had never put these feelings into words, passionate and vehement though they were, nor had she any one in the world to whom she could confide them. Poor girl! the conflict in her mind had often been beyond utterance; but she had clung desperately all through to that most variable and poorest of supports, her personal pride. And this had driven her into all manner of follies, as has been seen, and into this culminating folly at last.

She lay sleepless all the night through, and wept, thinking of Arthur. It would be better for him. No more would that anxious look come over his face, the look which had driven her wild and made her ruder and more self-assertive than ever—that anxiety as to her behavior and her appearance which made her tingle with the consciousness that she was still Nancy Bates, and would still be judged as such, whatever might happen. He would not be troubled with Nancy Bates now. He would go back untrammelled among his fine friends, where nobody made mistakes in dress, and where everybody knew as their A B C those things which were mysteries to her. He would be free—Nancy jumped up in her bed clenching her hands, her eyes heavy, her head hot, her brain almost mad with passion—he would be free! and she left here to be sneered at, and smiled at, and pointed at—a wife, a woman who had been forsaken!

Then this furious sense of humiliation would melt, and burst forth into a sense of something better which she had concealed, which no one had ever known. She had been a failure; but who would love him so well as she did among all the fine people he might meet with? who would think of him so much? She, thinking of him, had brought little happiness to Arthur; her love had been as a fire which scorched and charred rather than one which warmed and gladdened; but still, if anything happened to him, if trouble came in his way, who would be faithful like his wife—faithful to death, ready to confront every danger for him; but that he would never know.

The convulsions of feeling which she thus went through fortunately made Nancy ill. For a day or two she was feverish, and kept her bed, where she was waited on with sedulous care by her mother and sisters. They had never failed in kindness or affection, but they were now more anxious, more concerned than ever; for Nancy was still the great person of the family. She was rich in comparison with them. She had a house of her own—she was a lady. Numberless benefits might flow to them from her hands. This was not necessary to make these good people kind to their own flesh and blood; but still such considerations warm and quicken human feeling. They were not fond of Nancy for what she had to bestow, but the fact that she had something to bestow did not diminish their fondness. They hushed the house and kept it still, making Charley's life miserable, and the father's a burden to him, for Nancy's sake. It was her nerves, poor thing, they said, and everything had to give way to Nancy's nerves—things hitherto unknown in the house.

When, however, Nancy came down-stairs at last, after her bout of illness, she experienced not only the horrible sense of rebeginning which wrings the soul after any great calamity, but a sudden and fantastic increase of misery in the disgust which seized upon her for all her surroundings. Not only had she a new life to begin without Arthur, without hope, without any future widening of her horizon possible; but the home which she had sought so anxiously, and to which she had clung in opposition to Arthur and defiance of him, suddenly changed its aspect to her. She felt it the first afternoon when she came down-stairs, supported, though it was unnecessary, by her anxious mother, and was placed in the old easy-chair by the fire, which was burning brightly, though it was not necessary either, on this soft spring afternoon.

She had scarcely sat down in the chair, which was her father's chair, close to the fire and to the little mahogany bracket on which he placed his rum-and-water, when this sudden loathing seized her. The afternoon sun was shining into the room, betraying dust where dust was not expected, showing the imperfections of everything—the old hair-cloth sofa in the corner, the not very clean carpet, the table covered with painted oil-cloth. Meanness, smallness, poverty, seemed to have come into every detail. The air was too warm, and it was not fresh, but retained odors of the dinner, of the beer and cheese with which it had been concluded; for Mrs. Bates had not liked to open the window to chill the air for the invalid. What spell had fallen upon this room, which she had so longed for, and which she had returned to with such content? How mean it looked! what a contracted, paltry place, unlovely, unsweet! And it was to this that she had dragged Arthur! This was the thought that flew like an arrow through Nancy's mind. They brought a little tray with tea, and hot muffins to tempt her invalid appetite, and Mrs. Bates was at once alarmed and vexed when she pushed it peevishly away and declined to eat.

"You all know I can't bear muffins!" cried Nancy, pushing it away rudely; and her own action made her sick with self-disgust, as she noted unconsciously how rude, how ungracious and ungrateful it was. Yes, she was like the place—rude, ill-bred, not a lady! She could have cried, but she was too proud to cry, and in

stead of this innocent relief to her mind, became cross in her wretchedness and found fault with everything. "Oh, how hot it is!" she cried; "how can you live in this stifling atmosphere? One would think you were always having dinner, it is so stuffy—open the window, for pity's sake!" But when the window was open she began to shiver. "There is not a corner that is out of the draught," she said. Nothing that they did pleased her. Sarah Jane's noisy ways, as she went sweeping about, knocking down a chair here and a footstool there, sweeping against the table, were insupportable, and Matilda's demure quietness not much better. Everything grated on Nancy. And this was where she had brought Arthur, and had been angry that he was not delighted; and now Arthur was gone never to be found any more! Oh, how her heart sunk in her miserable bosom! Then came tea, the tray placed upon the oil-cloth, and hot toast this time brought to her instead of the muffins. The room was full now, her father and Charley added to the group of women. Mr. Bates looked at her when he came in, sitting in his chair, with a "humph!" of disapproval. Was she not only to be a failure as far as all their hopes were concerned, but to occupy his place also and put everybody out? Nancy saw the look, and jumped up in hot resentment.

"Oh, you shall have your chair!" she cried, and retreated to the sofa, where her mother feared she would take cold, so far from the fire. "Cold!" cried Nancy, "I think I shall never be cool again. You don't know how stuffy it is in this close little room."

"Upon my word!" said Sarah Jane. "Nobody's obliged to stay here! It is good enough for us, and so it might be for Nancy. I don't see that she's any better than the rest."

"Oh, hold your tongue, Sarah Jane!" cried Mrs. Bates; "can't you see that your poor sister is poorly and out of sorts?" But neither did she like to hear the parlor called stuffy. If it was good enough for the others, why was it not good enough for Nancy? And then the family settled to their evening occupations, and the lamp was brought in, which added the smell of paraffine to that of the tea. And then Mr. Bates had his rum-and-water; and Mr. Raisins came to visit Sarah Jane. He came in with a witty greeting to the family, which made them all laugh.

"Here we are again! and how was you all?" he said, with refined jocosity; and was making his way to the sofa, which was the lover's corner, when he saw Nancy there, and drew up with a significant look of dismay and a prolonged whistle of surprise. Nancy could bear it no longer. She started up with a cry of anger, and flew upstairs to her room, sick with disgust and misery.

"Do you like to see me insulted, mamma?" she said, when Mrs. Bates followed. "How can you endure that vulgar fellow? and how dares he show his insolence to me?"

"My dear," said Mrs. Bates, "you must not be unreasonable. He did not mean to be insolent. If we have not the refinements you have been used to, Nancy, still you mustn't forget the advantages of your old home—"

"Advantages!" Nancy murmured under her breath, but pride kept down the cry. Had not *she sacrificed her life for these* advantages, cast her own existence to the winds? She went to bed miserable, and cried herself to sleep.

This was but a melancholy beginning to the new life. When she heard afterward the arrangements that Arthur had made for her comfort, her first impulse was to accept nothing.

"I am no wife to him," she cried, "and why should I take his money? I will not take his money. What am I to Arthur now that he should maintain me? It is like taking charity."

But here Mr. Bates came in, who had a certain authority in such matters, if not a great deal of influence in other ways. Mr. Bates would stand no nonsense. It was bad enough that the responsibility of his daughter, and her behavior as a married woman separated from her husband, should fall upon her parents; but her support certainly should not—of that he was clear. And Nancy, fresh from all these conflicts and miseries, was cowed before her father, and dared not resist him, notwithstanding all her efforts to hold her own. She who had not yielded to Arthur's love and generosity, yielded to the tax-collector's practical decidedness. She could not help herself. And after a few days' growing wretchedness in this "home," for which she had sacrificed so much, Nancy was glad to retire to the villa, with the sensible Matilda for her companion, and begin again, as she best could in such changed and fallen circumstances, the career so perversely cut short. At least it was a relief to get away from the stuffy parlor, and the rum-and-water, and the grocer's wit and courtship—all of which, Heaven forgive her! she had called upon her husband to endure.

In two years from this time, strangely enough, the Bates family, and almost all trace of them, disappeared from Underhayes. Nothing had happened to them for all Nancy's lifetime till her marriage—nothing of an exciting kind. There had been neither misfortune nor great success in the house; but all had gone on with humdrum regularity, unexciting, unalarming. Mr. Bates had got a little mild promotion, and they had saved a very little money, and for the rest had eaten and drunk, and slept and waked, and all had been as if it might thus go on forever.

So flows the tranquil current of life, in many cases, for years and years, until at length the cycle of change commences, and all that has been done is undone. Nancy's marriage was the first family event, but it was followed in close succession by others. Charley went to New Zealand shortly after the separation between Arthur Curtis and his wife. Then, a little after, Sarah Jane married. Then Mr. Bates, in the midst of his tax-collecting, had an accident, and after lingering for a time died; and Mrs. Bates, a person of apparently robust constitution, both bodily and mental, developed all at once, to the amazement of her family and friends, an incapacity to live without the man whom she had not been very enthusiastic about or devoted to during his lifetime, and died in her turn, leaving her house desolate. Matilda, the only representative of the name, would have joined Charley in New Zealand but for her sister, to whom she had proved a discreet and faithful companion.

After, however, the little house was cleared, and all the old furniture dispersed, sold, or laid up in the house of the Raisiuses for their future

use, the two elder sisters disappeared, no one, except perhaps Sarah Jane, who said nothing about it, knowing whither. The little parlor passed away, like all the teas and dinners that had been consumed there, and the family existence ended. Notwithstanding the moving events that had been transacted in it, and the temporary link which had been woven between it and the upper classes of society, its history was all over like a bubble, like the snow on the mountain and the foam on the river.

The same fate befalls small and great; but in the case of a tax-collector the conclusion is more complete than that which comes upon the higher classes, which Mr. Bates respected so much. Death, emigration, marriage, disappearance, thus followed each other in swift succession. Young Mrs. Raisins, blooming in her shop—where, however, her bridegroom did not permit her to appear to minister to the wants of a vulgar public, keeping her, on the contrary, in high happiness and splendor, and without requiring her to do anything, in her drawing-room above the shop—alone remained of the family in Underhayes. And as for Nancy, no one knew anything about her, nor where she had gone.

CHAPTER XXXII.

EVERYTHING went on very quietly at Oakley during these two years. Arthur's visit at home was very brief, and not very lively. And if there was a temporary sense of relief in Lady Curtis's mind to know that he had escaped from the influence of "those people" and "that young woman," it soon disappeared in presence of Arthur's melancholy looks, and in contemplation of the painful position of a man so young, who was married, and yet not married, and whose path, accordingly, could not but be full of thorns and troubles. Such a position is dangerous and difficult in any sphere; but how much more in that to which he was going, where every temptation of society would surround the young man, and every freedom would be accorded to him! The mother and sister had many a discussion over him; but how difficult it was to question him on the subject, to pry into those arrangements of his which he did not care to reveal, or to ask anything about the final causes of the separation! Arthur, for his part, did not speak on the subject; when he arrived, at first, he had let them know, in a few words, that his wife and he had parted. "Don't ask me about it, for I can't tell you. I don't know how it is," he had said to his mother. "She will not conform to my way of living, and I cannot conform to hers—that is all. There is no blame; but how it happened, don't ask me, for I don't know."

Lady Curtis respected the request absolutely, and inquired no more of him. But it is needless to say how interesting the subject was to her; and with what eagerness she endeavored to get the information otherwise which Arthur would not furnish. Durant told her all that he knew personally, all that happened under his own eyes; but this was not much more satisfactory than Arthur's silence. "He has an air of thinking that she was not so very much in the wrong, after all," Lady Curtis said. "I do not understand Lewis. You would almost think, from the letters he writes, that she had bewitched him too."

"I don't think so," Lucy said, quickly, with a passing look upon her face which surprised her mother.

"I don't mean to say anything against her," said Lady Curtis. "It is not to be supposed that she has any great fault. God forbid, Lucy! I did not mean that."

Lucy did not make any reply. It was not, perhaps, her brother's wife she was thinking of. And when Arthur went away, Nancy became as if she had never existed to the family. They had Arthur's letters as in the days when nothing lay between him and home; nothing but mere distance and absence—time and space, innocent obstacles which harm no one, though they are hard enough to put up with. And his wife, whom he ceased to speak of, fell into the background with his people. To be sure, when any young man in the county, or whom they knew, made a brilliant and satisfactory marriage, Lady Curtis and Lucy would look at each other with quick interchange of glances. And Sir John would come in, in the afternoon, and set his back against the mantel-piece, while he took his cup of tea, and say, with a sigh, "They seem to be making a great fuss over young Seymour's marriage."

"Yes," Lady Curtis would answer with another sigh, "and no wonder—nothing could be more suitable." They were almost angry with young Seymour for marrying as the heir to such a property ought to have married; and, probably, Lucy would launch some arrow at the new pair in sheer impatience of the praise thus accorded. "So suitable that it is unnecessary to think of love in the matter," Lucy perhaps would say. And then Sir John would shrug his shoulders as he stood before the fire.

"Love! that's neither here nor there: if all the follies could be collected that have been done in the name of love!" And he would shake his gray old head, and again sigh, looking with eyes of admiration at Lucy as he went slowly back to his library, not able to get young Seymour and his fine marriage out of his head. Lady Curtis broke into a smile against her will as he went away.

"You are not to think of any such folly, Lucy," she said; "your father thinks that with your fortune you would be very happy unmarried. He says it is only poor people who need fear the fate of old maids. This is a great step for Sir John to take, who is such a Conservative."

"Are old maids against the Tory faith?" said Lucy, not sorry to have something to say.

"Yes; it is the ancient creed that every woman should marry, and that it is only the ugly, the cross, and the unlovable that fail to attain that glorious end. What a stretch of principle this is for your father! *I* do not go so far, even with my advanced views."

Lady Curtis looked at her daughter curiously as she spoke. They spent their lives together, hour by hour and year by year. They had everything in common: when the post came in, they opened each other's letters indiscriminately, the last depth of mutual confidence; read the same books, thought the same thoughts, were one in all the affairs of life; and yet in this most

intimate affair of all, the mother looked at the daughter with unutterable yearnings of curiosity, not knowing what Lucy thought.

Nothing was said for some time after. Spring had come breathing over the woods; and to look between the pillars of the façade through the long windows of my lady's room upon the avenue, was like looking into a wilderness of buds and hopes. "Here is Bertie coming again!" she said, with a little impatience; then laughing, "he is one, Lucy, of whom your father is afraid."

"Poor Bertie!" said Lucy, composedly; but she was startled into dismay when her mother suddenly burst into tears.

"To think," said Lady Curtis, "that Bertie's child, if he had a child, would be your father's heir!"

"Mamma!" Lucy blushed crimson, then laughed. "He is the second son — and Arthur—"

"Arthur will never have any children," said Lady Curtis, gloomily, "if things do not change. And she is young and strong, as young as you are—why should she die to accommodate us? And Gerald Curtis is a wandering invalid. Ah! there is no fear of the Seymours—they will have their own flesh and blood after them, whatever happens. But your father is growing an old man, Lucy; and Bertie—Bertie's son will be the heir!"

"He is not even married yet; there can be no need for vexing ourselves over such a remote contingency."

"But it will happen," said Arthur's mother, "though it is so remote. My boy is like Warrington, in 'Pendennis,' Lucy, shut off from life; no child for him, no love for him; all because of one foolish, foolish step when he was nothing but a boy!"

"But, mamma! you really do not mean that boys should be permitted to escape the consequences of such foolish steps?" cried Lucy. "How unlike you to say so!"

"Ah! one becomes unlike one's self when it is one's self that suffers," said Lady Curtis, with a sigh.

And then Bertie made his appearance, and all feeling was banished from her countenance. She discussed young Seymour's marriage with interest. "Nothing could have been more suitable—so suitable that one felt something must interpose to put a stop to it. The girl of all others he ought to have married! And a charming girl—pretty, and well-bred, and sweet—"

"I hear they are all immensely pleased; but I do not admire her so much as you do. She is not the style I care for," said the rector. "She is too charming, and too sensible, and too everything she ought to be, for me."

"Faultily faultless," said Lady Curtis, smiling. She was pleased that he did not approve of young Seymour's perfect wife.

"And she is heavy," said Bertie. "I used to know her very well. Her brother was of my college. She will not be an addition to the gayety of the family. She has not very much to say for herself."

"All the more suitable," Lady Curtis said, brightening visibly, "they are all heavy." She had never liked Bertie so well. She told him the news in Arthur's last letter, that he was liking Vienna very much, and happy in his new position; and wound up by an invitation to dinner. Lucy sat by and worked, and wondered, not without a smile about the corners of her mouth. She had no objection to her cousin, nor any alarm of him in her mind. He was "not the style she cared for," she said to herself, with a mocking echo of his speech; but that Lady Curtis, after her melancholy anticipation of the inevitable heirship of Bertie's problematical son, should be so easily mollified, amused her daughter. She let the conversation go on while she worked quietly, thinking her own thoughts.

Lucy did not, perhaps, find the idea of remaining unmarried as attractive as her father did. She smiled at that too in her secret thoughts. Who is there that does not smile at it, being young? Why should there be any one in the world who was not happy, who did not have all that the imagination desires—love and honor, and all the brightnesses and sympathy which love can give? Lucy had a private world to retire into at odd moments, a world so peopled that her fancy could not receive the idea of a lonely life. While her mother and Bertie talked, she had opened her secret door and gone in, entering into that vague, sweet blessedness of dreams which is more than any vulgar reality of happiness. She heard their conversation, but it did not touch her. Her head was bent down a little over that work at which she was seldom so industrious, and even the smile was concealed that floated about her lips—that smile which was not for her family, much as she loved them. Lady Curtis had tried her best to lift the curtain, to look into that secret world of which she suspected the existence, but which she had no clue to, no thread to guide her through; but it did not occur to her to think of this at the moment when her daughter had escaped into it from her very side.

"So Bertie is coming," said Sir John. "Why Bertie? Yes, to be sure, he is a relation, and has a claim; but I see no reason why you should ask him so often. It looks as if you meant to throw him in Lucy's way."

"He will never be anything to Lucy," said Lady Curtis, smiling.

"That is all very well; but how do you know? Girls are not like anything else. They may hate a man one week and accept him the next. I've lived long enough to see that."

"You think they like to begin with a little aversion, as Mrs. Malaprop says—"

"Eh? I don't know anything about Mrs. Malaprop. I speak from my own observation. I would not put him in Lucy's way."

"No one would be less likely to attract Lucy's attention. Why, Bertie! he is no more equal to Lucy—"

"As if that mattered," said Sir John, with quiet contempt. "What do they care? You've had one example; you ought to know better; and you will have another before you know where you are. You are injudicious, I must say. You don't mind whom you introduce Lucy to, my lady; and if it is not one it will be another," he said, winding up hurriedly as Lucy came in. The parents both looked at her with that tender admiration which is, perhaps, of all admiration the most exquisite. They were not easily pleased in respect to Lucy. Her dress, her ornaments, her appearance, were all surveyed with fastidious

eyes; and from her shiny hair to the tip of her little satin shoe, these two difficult people could bear no imperfection in this lamp of their life. Sir John's inspection was not so minute or so intelligent as his wife's; he could not tell what she had on, or whether there was technical perfection in her toilet; but he was very critical about the general effect. As for Lady Curtis, she went into all the details; and they were both satisfied; it was no small thing to say. There was a little cluster of white narcissus in her hair, which her mother liked, but at which Sir John shook his head. "Is that for Bertie?" he said, jealously, in his mind. Girls were strange creatures; they liked to be admired, whether they cared for the man who admired them or not; and no doubt she would fall a victim to one of my lady's *protégés*, if not to Bertie. This thought it was, along with disapprobation of the flowers, as something added to her toilet for Bertie's sake, which made Sir John shake his head.

"The Rolts were to have been here to-day," said Lady Curtis; "but I hear Mrs. John caught cold at the Seymours', and Julia has gone to nurse her."

"Julia is always nursing somebody," said Sir John.

Julia was Mrs. Rolt, the wife of the agent, who was a humble relation of the Curtises; and Mrs. John Rolt was the wife of his brother, the lawyer at Oakenden, who had the affairs of the county in his hands.

"She will have heard everything about the marriage. As soon as she comes back she will rush up here, wet or dry, to tell us what the bride'smaids had on, and all about the breakfast. It is a long time," said Lady Curtis, with a sigh, "since there have been such grand doings in the county; not since Arthur came of age."

"I am glad to hear that Arthur gets on so well in Vienna," said the rector, addressing himself to his uncle; "that is better than the Seymours' junketings. I hope he'll make a mark in diplomacy. He ought, with his abilities."

"Ah, yes," said Sir John; "as for making a mark, that's another thing. It's very well for the present; but a country gentleman's place is at home in his own county. It's all very well now."

"Well, sir," said the rector, "some of us have no chance beyond the county, or even the parish; but when a man has a chance, he ought to take advantage of it."

"There's nothing better than the county," said Sir John, "and the parish for a clergyman. What would you have? You can't do more than your duty, wherever you may be. I hope Arthur will stick to his, and then I sha'n't complain. If he had been at it sooner, it would have been better for us all."

"Lewis Durant has been hearing a great deal about him," said Lady Curtis; "everything that is most satisfactory. Lewis is not much in society, I suppose—his work would not permit it; but he hears everything at the club. That is where you men get all your news. I hear all sorts of things from him; and he knows the kind of news that is most acceptable here."

"There is a great deal in that," said the rector. "Some men make quite a business of it. It helps a man *on wonderfully*; but if Durant is rising in his profession, as you were saying, he can't have much time for his club. Son of old Durant, the saddler, isn't he? How odd that such men should be in clubs at all!"

Bertie Curtis knew exactly what he was doing; he was not cowed by the look of indignant wonder which met him from Lady Curtis's eyes, nor the less open gleam of scorn and defiance which came from under Lucy's drooped eyelids. It was Sir John the rector meant to work upon, not the ladies, whom he knew to be partisans of his rival. Nobody had ever hinted that Durant was his rival, or that Sir John was nervous on the subject; but there are some things which reveal themselves without the aid of words.

"Not the son, the grandson," said Sir John. "Old Durant is dead long ago, and left a very good fortune; but they've run through a great part of it, I fear. That is the worst of fortunes made in trade; they go as fast as they come. As for young Durant, I wish half the young men in the clubs were half as good fellows. But he is not the kind of man, one must allow, whom you would expect to see familiar in our houses."

"What kind of men do you like to see familiar in your house?" said Lady Curtis. "Empty-headed nobodies? Lewis will always make his way. He has friends that are more worth having than we are. He goes everywhere."

"Does he, indeed?" said the rector; "and his profession, what becomes of his profession? His father—or grandfather, was it?—would not have approved of that; but lawyers, though everybody says they are so hard-working, have a great deal of leisure, I think. How different a clergyman is now—"

"Cousin Bertie, were you not at Epsom or somewhere the other day?" said Lucy, whose indignation was almost beyond words.

"Yes; I went down with Gerald, who has to be amused, poor fellow; but I did not think any one knew," the rector said, hastily; at which Sir John, though perhaps it was not quite polite, shook his head.

"The turf is all very well," he said. "It suits some men well enough; but a clergyman should not get the name of it, Bertie. I don't like it for a clergyman."

"Nor I, sir; you are perfectly right, as you always are. I may have liked horses too much in my younger days—not wisely, but too well, perhaps—we all have some weakness; but I hope since I took orders there has been nothing to object to," said the rector, looking his astonished uncle full in the face, with mild defiance. And what could Sir John say, thus boldly encountered? "Poor Gerald is a wretched invalid," he continued, "sick of everything. I never saw such a *blasé* washed-out being. He has had too much of what people call life, and he's tired enough of it all. They think at home that his health depends upon keeping him amused—that's why I went," said Bertie, with all the innocence imaginable. "We've all got to amuse him, and you might just as well try to amuse this table. He is bored to death with everything. But, then, he always was my father's favorite, and he can do no wrong."

There was a pause, for this Gerald, the eldest son, who was bored with everything, and in bad health, and possessed every attribute disliked by Sir John, was, failing Arthur, the heir presump-

tive of Oakley; and this passed through the minds of all the party, bringing a pang of unhappiness with it, as the rector knew it would do.

"Is he likely to marry, I wonder?" said Sir John.

"That is the only foolish thing he has omitted to do. It is far from being a foolish thing with most people; but with him, worn out in body and mind, old before his time, and without a penny, why should he marry?"

"I am not so sure of that," said Sir John, with a sigh; and then he broke out hastily with an exclamation and question, in which a stranger would have seen little coherence. "Lord, what a strange world it is! How many boys are there of the Seymours?" he said.

That was the bitterest thought to them. Young Seymour to marry somebody so very suitable, and, failing him, if he had not married, half a dozen boys to succeed! whereas Arthur had put himself out of court, and made all succession in the direct line impossible; and there were only Anthony's sons to follow. Anthony's sons! the thought was gall and wormwood to them both. Gerald, a worn-out young *roué*, and Bertie; one of them must come after Arthur, who had cut off himself, or at least cut off all following, all blessings of succession. And such a suitable marriage as young Seymour had made! What wonder if it went to their hearts?

"I've seen Durant at Epsom too," said the rector, forgetting, for the moment, his own line of self-defence; "he's very much about, I think; here and there, and wherever one goes. Men of his class lay themselves out to please; they have more motive, I suppose, than men of more assured position."

"Mr. Durant," said Lady Curtis, hotly, "lays himself out, if you like the expression, Bertie, to be of use to his friends. He has got from his Maker one of the kindest hearts that ever beat, and consequently he is welcome wherever he is known."

"There is justice, though, in what Bertie says," said Sir John, coming up with his heavy forces to conclude the argument. "A young fellow like that may be very friendly, but you can't take his friendship for nothing, my lady; and what would you ladies say who make so much of him, if the tradesman's grandson asked for one of your daughters? That would open your eyes."

Sir John felt that he had made a great *coup* when he said this, and he was glad of the opportunity of saying it; but nevertheless he was a little afraid of the consequences.

"Take another glass of wine," he said, hurriedly, pushing the decanter towards his nephew. "You'll excuse me not sitting long to-night, for I've something to do."

This cut short any indignant remonstrance that might have been on Lady Curtis's lips. She and Lucy took the hint and went away; but they did not say anything to each other, as they certainly would have done had any one but Durant been in question. To tell the truth, the great curiosity in Lady Curtis's curious and lively mind was on this subject of Durant. What did Lucy think of him? What did he think of Lucy? But as neither one nor the other had spoken to her on the subject, how could she interfere? *She stole many a look* at her daughter as they went to their tranquil occupations together. Perhaps Lucy's eyes were heavier than usual, less ready to meet her mother's; but she said not a word on the subject; and from Lady Curtis's side, after that utterance of her husband's, what was there to say?

CHAPTER XXXIII.

Thus time went on at Oakley as elsewhere, with little happening, long lulls coming after the moments of active living which tell for so much in individual history, yet usually occupy so little space in it. Arthur was as much away from them as if he had been at Underhayes—more, in one way, for he was now swallowed up in public life, embarked upon that bigger sea of business or pleasure which absorbs all individual interests. They did not hear much more of him than when he was absorbed by his bride, and yet how different it was! Though Arthur was less happy, though he was farther off, yet he was restored to his family. They spoke of him freely to each other and to strangers. There was no longer any cloud upon him; he was in his natural position. It was true that the friends of the family would turn to each other and ask in a whisper, "Do you ever hear anything of his wife? what has become of his wife?" after the conversation about him, how he was liking his new appointment, and all about it, which was carried on openly. "What has been done with *her*?" the friends said; "or *was* it really a marriage, after all?"

Many people came expressly to put these questions to Mrs. Rolt, who, being a distant relative as well as the agent's wife, naturally knew all about the family affairs. Cousin Julia was very prudent, all the more prudent that she knew nothing about the matter, no more than the questioners themselves. But about Arthur everybody talked openly now, inquiring how he liked Vienna, which was a great relief from the time when the country neighbors did not know how to manage—whether to remain silent about him altogether, which was the safest way, or to frame careful questions which could not compromise them. It was very lucky that all this was now at an end; but still nobody knew much of Arthur, and, except that one rapid visit, he was never seen at home.

Arthur himself, it need not be said, had a great many convulsions to go through. Probably he had not expected that Nancy would acquiesce calmly in the arrangements made for her. He knew her pride, and he knew also the relentings of tenderness that were in the girl; and in his heart he believed that she would have scorned the money he had left for her, would repudiate the settlement altogether—which would have made a return necessary upon all their steps—and might, indeed, put out all calculations by rushing back into his arms suddenly, without rhyme or reason, and making an end of these miserable bargainings. The hope of this kept him up, though he would not acknowledge it even to himself. She might come, even, in her impetuosity, to Oakley—he could believe this possible, unlikely though it was—but at least to his lodg-

ings in town, where he lingered, making preparations, and thinking that every sound outside his room meant the arrival of his penitent wife. But Nancy did nothing of the kind, as has been seen. She accepted the income, and settled down and took no notice of him. Was it possible that it had all been calculation from beginning to end, and that she had never loved him at all?

He never said anything of this, never betrayed his expectation nor his disappointment, unless it might be to Durant, who knew his thoughts before they got into words, and who also on his part had expected better things of Nancy; for, naturally, neither of them knew how her practical father had cowed her, and how all her tempers and impetuosities had been quenched by the dull and vulgar obstacle of his determination not to have his daughter back upon his hands without a fit provision.

Thus it was for the first time they did her absolute wrong in their thoughts. When Arthur, having finally given up all those delusions which at first had been so consolatory, but which now in their failure were so bitter, left England, the severance was real and complete. His mind was now at last turned violently away from the object of his love. Passion can be borne, that passion which impels a hasty spirit to foolish actions unintended in cooler moments; and even change can be forgiven; but who could forgive the bitter wrong of having been chosen from the first for interested motives, of having been the mere representative of wealth and advancement to the woman who had accepted his love? Was she never true at all? never tender, never touched by the flame of love which had burned in Arthur's breast? This was the one intolerable thought; and when silence followed all these agitations, and Nancy accepted without a word what he could do for her, and left him without a word, to endure as he best might, taking mere vulgar comfort from his hands, instead of all that he had been willing to bestow, the poor young fellow's heart closed with a pang against her. How much had she cost him. But she would not permit him to cost her anything. She would give up nothing to him, or for him. What could it have been all along that she cared for? Not him, but what he had to bestow; and all that had been said on this subject came back to Arthur's mind—the discussions beforehand, which made it apparent that Nancy had hoped to be my lady very soon; and her complaints after, that she was so little the better of the fine marriage she had made. These were trifles, but such trifles as turn honey itself into gall, and make all evils ten times worse. He was in very low spirits when he left England. When Durant spoke of his return, he shook his head.

"It is much more likely that I will never come back," he said. "Why should I come back? I shall be out of everybody's way there."

"Arthur, you know there is nobody who wants you out of the way."

"I don't know it; I know the reverse. I shall be out of *her* way. She will be left in quiet. If I came here, I might not be able to put up with it, Durant. And how can they look at me at home without thinking what a mess I have made of everything? My poor father! I believe he feels it most of all—all the more for having so little to say."

"Come, come! Sir John will not break his heart."

"You don't know him," said Arthur, glad of a reason which would justify the desolate misery in his own. "Poor old governor! he feels it more than my mother does. She will storm at you, or mock at you, or cry over you, and get it out; but he says nothing. And the disappointment in me, the failure of me!—I shouldn't wonder if they broke his heart."

Arthur's eyes grew red while he spoke. He was young enough to feel the tears in their fountains; but, poor boy! while he spoke of Sir John, it was Nancy of whom he thought. He loved her, and she thought nothing, except allowances and comforts, of him. She would allow him to pay her money, to share his income with her; but not to share his heart with her, and all his thoughts. These she did not want. Poor Arthur! if that would have done him any good, he would have laid down his head and wept. But as it was, he had to shake back indignantly into the depths all emotions which required stormy utterance. He could be sorry for his father, but he must not be sorry for himself.

And this was how he went away. An attaché of a foreign legation is not supposed to be the most hard-working of men. Yet there are things which they may do, when it is a matter of preference for them to be occupied; and Arthur went into society, almost vehemently, not caring to remember himself and his position. Perhaps he did not pass through the furnace entirely unscathed. He thrust Nancy's image out of his heart, and shut the door on her, and pretended not to be conscious of the efforts that image made to get back. Not Nancy—Nancy herself made no attempt one way or another, no overture; but her image, her recollection, that reflection of her which had occupied him when she was gone, kept persistently upon the threshold of the temple whence she had been expelled. Perhaps he was not always faithful to her, but sought after new impressions, new sensations, as a man may be excused for doing to whom the shrine of his heart has already been defiled; but he never got beyond the feeling that she was there—his rightful queen, and, what was more, his actual possessor, whatever he might think, or others might think.

Meanwhile he lived a gay and busy life. He talked and danced, and, no doubt, flirted; for though he had made his position known, there were plenty of people in society to whom his position was quite indifferent; and Nancy, had she seen her husband, who was so devoted to her, in those early days of separation, would no doubt have had occasions for heavy enough thoughts on her part. But all the same, her image was never farther off than outside the door—artificially closed and bolted by curious devices, but of itself ever ready to open—of Arthur's heart.

All this, however, makes an effect upon a man; and when Durant wrote to him, after the interval of those two years, that the parents were dead, and that Nancy had left Underhayes, it made a great commotion in his mind, no doubt, but it did not rouse him to instant action. His first thought, indeed, was to rush home himself, and come to her help in her trouble; but this was only a first thought. Why should he go? said a soberer impulse. Had she not rejected

him, driven him from her, refused to be touched by any argument he could offer? and why should he humble himself to seek her again without any indication that he would be more successful this time? No, no, he would not risk a repetition of it all. Repetitions are always to be avoided. If any lingering feeling for him had been in her mind, would not she have had him informed of this new state of circumstances which might have modified affairs between them? But she had said nothing, she had taken no notice of his existence at this moment of trouble, when her heart, no doubt, must have been touched. He wrote to Durant to inquire into the circumstances, and to let him know how Nancy was; but he did nothing more.

As for Durant, his heart perhaps was softer, and he wondered at Arthur's indifference; or, perhaps, it was only that he himself had not been the offended and slighted person; and no one, however warm a friend, can feel our grievances as we ourselves do. Durant had not himself been particularly happy during these two years. He had worked hard and made progress in his profession, but he had not made very wonderful progress. His father, who had spent his fortune when he had one, had shown no disinclination to go on spending when he had none; and all that Lewis got by his labors did not seem too much to keep the paternal house going.

Whosoever will work and support other people who don't, has to work and be eaten up in this world. It is a common enough fate; and with Durant, as with so many others, the miserable meanness of those who sucked his blood and mind, always wanting more, was a heavier affliction than the loss of his hard earnings, which he took with greater philosophy. "For what good were they to himself?" he said, somewhat bitterly. Lucy was as far, nay, farther, from him than ever. He had not been asked to Oakley at all during the last year; and though he still saw the ladies of the family now and then, Sir John's disapproval had been too distinct to make it possible to disregard it, so that everything was at a stand-still in this respect. Lucy understood him, he believed; but what would it serve him to be secretly understood if he could go no farther? if years like this were to float away before he could approach her openly; before he could break through the obstacles on all sides, and venture to present himself with his suit openly?

Indeed, for the last year Durant had almost come to acquiesce in his banishment, to feel that it was better for him not to see her, not to vex her with a sight of his faithfulness. Rather that she should forget all about it; not linger, as he did, on the verge of despair, but be happy, whether he was happy or not. He had come this length when Arthur commissioned him to make those inquiries at Underhayes, and it may be supposed with how many thoughts, with what suppressed impatience, of these two, who were thus voluntarily wrecking their happiness, and destroying everything that was best in life to each other, this martyr to social prejudice and other people's sins trod over again the road he had gone with Lucy, along those streets which he had hurried through to witness Arthur's marriage. Had it been Lucy and he who had *pledged their faith that winter morning*, what sweet years of righteous toil, softened and made joyful by love and sympathy, might his have been! while the other two, who had taken the matter into their own hands, defiant of duty, had wrecked themselves thus, and parted as lightly and easily as they had come together.

But for his father's folly, Durant might have had that to offer to the object of his faithful affection which even Sir John could not despise; and but for her brother's folly, Lucy would have been free to accept, or refuse, that honest offering. He did not know that she would have accepted it; but there had been moments in which his hopes had risen almost to certainty, only to be cast down again into more miserable depths. Thus the two to whom honor and duty ranked highest were kept apart, and might be kept apart all their lives; while the two who thought but little of either (was not this hard upon Arthur?) played with the happiness they had snatched in defiance of duty, and threw it away.

Durant may be pardoned, all things considered, for these hard thoughts; for, modest as he was, hope had been high in his breast when he conducted Lucy to her brother's wedding. But gradually, bit by bit, that hope had ebbed away. He had thought of winning her family's favor by his devotion to their service. He had thought that their familiar friendship with him might have balanced the humbleness of his birth. He had once thought his money, now lost, might tell for something. But all had worked against him instead of for him; while Arthur, who had got the happiness he wanted, the desire of his heart, had thrown it away. These thoughts filled his mind as he walked through the streets of Underhayes. He went to the little house in which the Bateses had lived, from which it seemed impossible to believe that the flavor of the early dinners and the evening rum-and-water could have faded away.

When lovely things are carried hence by death, the vacancy is less strange, almost less poignant, than when that tragi-comic strain of grim amusement comes in, and we feel that things so earthy, things having no affinity with a higher sphere, have come under its sublimating touch. Could anything have made the tax-collector's evening potations approach solemnity? And yet there was a kind of awe in the recollection of all those vulgar circumstances gone, with the vulgar being to whom they belonged, into the darkness—into the unknown which is not vulgar. Death is more akin to the noble and beautiful than it is to the paltry and commonplace. It is not unnatural that those should die and be translated into the sphere to which their finer impulses belong; but *these*, what have they to do with dying, with heaven and hell and the unseen? This was what Durant felt as he looked with a kind of strange pity into the room, now occupied by a young mother with her little children.

"All messages is to go to Raisins, the grocer," she said, opening the familiar door. It seemed to Durant impossible that Arthur was not there seated with Nancy upon the old hair-cloth sofa within; but he met the hair-cloth sofa a little farther on, standing out in the damp at a broker's door; and Arthur and Nancy, where were they? never, it would seem, likely to sit together again.

"Oh la! Mr. Durant!" said Sarah Jane. She blushed, and gave a glance at her husband in his

white apron, and felt a burning pang that she had not married a gentleman. "Won't you step up-stairs, sir?—do step up-stairs!" she cried. She was glad that the customers in the shop, and even her husband, should see how intimate she was with a gentlemanlike-looking person, such as Durant undeniably was. And she told him all about the accident that had carried off papa, and mother's inability to survive him. She was in all the freshness of her mourning, and shed a few natural tears, notwithstanding the pleasure she had in exhibiting her drawing-room to one of Arthur's friends. "You would have thought she didn't take much notice of him; but he had a deal more in him than people thought, Mr. Durant, and she couldn't live without him. She lingered just seven weeks. I can't say that she ever held up her head again."

"And your sister has gone away?"

"Oh yes, my sister has gone away. Mamma wasn't one to say very much, but I say it's as touching an instance of conjugal affection—like what they put in the newspapers; and I tell Mr. Raisins, I'm sure I hope I'll do as much for him when our time comes," said Sarah Jane, half laughing, half crying. "The doctor couldn't say what it was."

"And—Nancy?"

"You might be more civil, Mr. Durant. My sister isn't one to be spoken of as if she was a house-maid; but I forgot—you were always such a friend of Arthur Curtis. I see his name sometimes in the papers. La! the difference marriage makes! I never used to look at the papers, but now I read them regular every morning; and I see Arthur's name sometimes."

"Yes," said Durant, "and your sister, Mrs. Raisins—where has your sister gone?"

"Oh, it has been a trying time!" said Sarah Jane. "Charley went first; and I'm sure, if it's all true about New Zealand, I wonder we don't all go; and then papa died, and then mamma, and now there's Nancy."

"But she has not died, or gone to New Zealand?"

"I never said she had, Mr. Durant. I was saying it was a trying time, one thing coming on the back of another. I'm thankful Mr. Raisins and me were married before it all began, for if we hadn't been there's no telling what might have happened. I couldn't have been married in my mourning."

"Has Mrs. Arthur Curtis removed far off? It would be very kind to give me an answer."

"Oh la! how can I tell?" cried Sarah Jane. "She's as self-willed as the old gentleman himself. Nothing stops her when she's made up her mind. There's no telling where she may get to before she's done."

"She is travelling, then? She may perhaps go to Vienna? Is that what you mean?"

"I couldn't say what I mean—I don't mean anything particular. You never can, when it's Nancy. She may go here or she may go there, and nobody can tell."

"But you must know something—you must have an address for her letters."

"Bless you, she never has any letters; who would write to her? She always paid her way, I must say that for her—and what letters could she have? She never was one for writing letters herself, so I don't expect to hear; and as for writing, if I don't hear, I never would think of doing such a thing."

"But you must know something of her," said Durant, alarmed. "You cannot have lost sight of your sister."

"Such things have happened," said Sarah Jane, with a certain pleasure in his discomfiture. "When you're married you've other things to think of than just your own family. I've got my house now and my husband: he don't ask me to do anything in the business, not a thing; but I like to be serviceable when I can, though I'm glad to say I've no need, Mr. Durant. We're doing very well, and I've got my nice drawing-room, all my own and paid for, and my servants, and my front-door to walk out of, as nice as any lady's in the land."

"I am very glad you are so well off; but there is something I wish to communicate to your sister."

"Oh, you sha'n't communicate with her through me; I have had enough of that. How foolish of Arthur, Mr. Durant, to make such a fuss! and Nancy too. They never could get on together. I don't say it was her fault or it was his fault, but they never got on."

"Then you will not tell me where she is?" said Durant.

"Oh, I never said anything one way or another," said Sarah Jane; but he could not get any other reply from her, and left Underhayes as little informed as when he came. One other fact he ascertained, however, from Arthur's banker, who informed him formally that Nancy's allowance had been returned by the country banker to whom they were in the habit of remitting it, with the intimation that it would be received no longer, Mrs. Arthur Curtis having left the place without giving any address. Thus Nancy made the first use of her liberty. She disappeared, leaving no trace of which they could get hold, and the place that had known her, already knew her no more.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

It was about a month after this, in the early autumn, when Lucy Curtis, coming down from the Hall upon one of her courses of visitation in the village, went, as she often did, to Cousin Julia to report herself as she passed, and inquire if there were any special troubles requiring her aid in the little community. Mrs. Rolt was not herself so active as her young cousin; but she heard of everything that was wanted, and was the universal medium of communication between the village and the Hall. The poor people came to her if she did not go to them, and her poor neighbors had unbounded reliance upon her kindness, liking her all the better, perhaps, that she never made any investigations into their cleanliness or providence, and did not trouble them with visits, but was sorry, indiscriminately, for everybody who was in trouble, and for everybody who was sick had port-wine to bestow and beef-tea.

It was not entirely indolence, but rather a just knowledge of herself, combined with a love of keeping at home, which intercepted "parish work" on her part. "I know I should gossip," she said, with looks of humility, when it was sug-

gested to her that she should visit the poor; and there could be no doubt that she availed herself even of the lessened opportunities presented to her in this particular when the poor visited her. She was lying in wait for Lucy on this particular morning, which happened to be one of the days on which the young lady was expected in the village.

Lucy had a great deal of business to do which is not reckoned in the management of an estate. She had the villagers to look after, which probably ought to have been the rector's business. But as the rector did not take naturally to that portion of his work, it was she who did it. She had her little private savings-bank, her small provident societies, her clothing clubs, her parish library, all in her own management, with various additions to the formal educational processes of the place; classes for big girls and boys, and a private little school of cookery, and many small matters, all intended to make the people of Oakley happy; which object, perhaps, they did not succeed in fulfilling, but yet did infinitesimal scraps of good, such as is the utmost most human schemes attain to. One of these undertakings required her presence to-day. It was an October day, the leaves falling, the sky red; and the time was nearly three years from Arthur's marriage. It was cold enough to make that warm jacket quite expedient which she had hesitated to put on; and as Lucy approached Mrs. Rolt's house, Mrs. Rolt stationed herself at the window, ready to tap as she passed, and secure ten minutes'—conversation, Cousin Julia called it, but gossip would be the proper word to say.

The house of the Rolts was a large substantial building of brick, very much like the Rectory, but not with the same imposing grounds; a house of Queen Anne's time, with a pediment, and rows of twinkling windows flush with the wall. There was an excellent garden behind, but in front nothing save one large very white door-step between the door and the street; and the windows of the dining-room, where Mrs. Rolt sat in the morning, were so close upon the road that no one could escape her whom she chose to arrest in this way.

"I am coming," said Lucy, nodding as she passed; and the neat house-maid, already on the alert, rushed to open the door.

"Missis has been looking for you all the morning," Sally said. There was evidently something more than ordinary to say.

Nothing could be more warm and cosy than the Rolts' dining-room. Its warm red curtains filled all the intervals between the windows, not, it is to be feared, as the canons of art would approve at the present day, but with a comfortable fulness. The room itself was panelled, however, which would have redeemed it, notwithstanding that the old mantel-shelf had been tampered with, and was not so high up as it ought to have been. There was a big table in the centre of the room, and two easy-chairs by the fire. The newspaper thrown down in one of them showed that Mr. Rolt himself had but lately left this comfortable room. A big old mahogany sideboard, not handsome, but substantial, stood against the end wall, and a long row of low bookcases opposite the windows. There was not much room to move about because of the big table, upon which there was nothing decorative *except a huge basin of china-asters*, the last of the garden; but the room was warm, and very handy, Mrs. Rolt thought, when she had anything to do. The good soul never had anything to do; but what did that matter? She liked to have her big basket of odds and ends brought down and placed upon the table, where there was plenty of room; and there she would occupy herself very pleasantly looking out skeins of wool which might make a pair of socks for a poor child, and bits of cloth which would answer for some one's patchwork. These last were very useful whenever a bundle of children happened to come to Oakley. More dolls than tongue could reckon had been dressed out of Mrs. Rolt's odds and ends; but they did not do so much good to the poor children who were in want of socks. Mrs. Rolt met Lucy at the door, and kissed her, and brought her into the big chair.

"How-are-you-and-how-is-your-mamma-and-everybody?" she said in a breath, linking all the words together in her eagerness to get over preliminaries. "Will-you-have-a-cup-of-chocolate-after-your-walk?" No? Then-sit-down-and-I-will-tell-you-something," said Cousin Julia, out of breath.

"I knew you must have something to tell me when I saw your face. What is it? You don't look as if anything very bad had happened."

"Oh, it is nothing very bad. I don't suppose it is of much consequence, and yet it is very funny, you know. Lucy, two ladies have come to live in the little Wren Cottage. Did you ever hear of such a thing? two ladies, one of them tall and handsome—my old Sam has quite lost his heart; and the other not so pretty, and much commoner-looking, and both complete strangers, nobody knowing about them, or where they came from, or whom they belong to; and quite young. Did you ever hear anything so strange?"

"Two ladies in the Wren Cottage! Yes, that is news," said Lucy, with much composure. "I hope they will turn out pleasant neighbors: it will be very agreeable for you."

"Won't it? But it is not that, so much, that I am thinking of. Who can they be, you know, Lucy, to choose a place like this to settle in, where there is no attraction, no society, no inducement whatever?"

"There is you, and Bertie at the Rectory; that is not bad; and it is very pretty, you know," said Lucy. "I don't wonder that any one should choose Oakley. Where could you find so pretty a place?"

"That is all very well, my dear," said Mrs. Rolt, who, not having been brought up in Oakley, was less enthusiastic; "but how did they find out that it was a pretty place? No one has ever seen them here before. They could not find it out by instinct, you know, could they? To be sure, Wren Cottage has been advertised in the paper, and is let for almost nothing at all. That might tempt them, perhaps, if they are poor."

"Very likely indeed, I should think; and they must be poor, or else they would never come to Oakley. Is not that what you are thinking? I am glad you are going to have neighbors."

"Going, Lucy! My love, they are there. Look—look out of the farthest window; don't you see somebody's back in the bedroom doing something? Look—as plain as possible between the white curtains. Somebody's back, and I do believe an ear!"

"I could not swear to the ear," said Lucy, laughing; "but I see there is something; and there is Fanny Blunt at the door, charing: that is good," she continued, warming into interest. "Fanny Blunt is a good little girl. I am glad she has a place."

"Listen, Lucy. I told you there were two of them. They don't look like sisters, but Fanny says they are sisters."

"Oh, Cousin Julia! you have been asking Fanny—"

"Only her mother, only her mother, dear. *Of course,* I would not for the world question the girl about her mistresses—you could not think I would be guilty of such a thing, Lucy—but her mother tells me they are two sisters. You would scarcely believe it. The little one is a nice common-looking person; but the other, the one who was at the window, and you saw her ear—"

"But I could not swear to the ear."

"Don't laugh, dear. I assure you I am quite serious, and very, *very* much interested. Their name is Arthur, and one of them is married; at least it is Mrs. Arthur that has taken the cottage. Of course, if the other is her sister, she can scarcely be Arthur too."

"Mrs. Arthur!" said Lucy, startled.

"Do you know the name, Lucy? Do you know any one of the name? I should like, I must say, to find out some clue."

Lucy shook her head. She did not know any one of the name, which is, of course, a respectable surname borne by many people. It could have nothing to do with any one she knew.

"I know it only as a Christian-name," said Lucy.

"Ah, as a Christian-name—everybody knows it as that," said Mrs. Rolt. "Poor dear Arthur, I think of him every day, poor fellow!"

"He seems to be happy enough, Cousin Julia. We need not call him poor fellow now."

"No; but then it is uncomfortable, you know, to be like that, separated from his wife. To be sure, if they did not get on, it was better, perhaps; but what a pity, Lucy, they did not get on! There must be great faults, I always say, on the woman's side."

"On both sides, I should think," said Lucy, with a sigh.

"On the woman's side chiefly, my dear; for we know we ought to give in. We may always be quite sure we ought to give in, whatever our husbands may do; and in that case things generally come right; for you know one person cannot quarrel by himself, can he? There must always be two. But that has nothing to do with the poor lady opposite."

"Is she a poor lady? You seem to know more about her than you said at first."

"Well, Fanny—or, rather, Fanny's mother—she comes, you know, about her rent—poor thing, she is always behind with her rent—and she says she is either a widow or her husband is away. He may be a sailor, you know, or in India, or something of that sort; and she does not seem to expect him home. It is a sad position for a young woman. I am not quite sure which of them is Mrs. Arthur, though; the little dumpy one is certainly the oldest, but then the tall one looks the most superior."

"Perhaps it is not always the superior who is the married one," said Lucy, again tempted to laugh; for such guesses throw gleams of reflection upon the hearers, and lead young women unconsciously to think of themselves.

"No, indeed; I was thirty-five myself before I married, Lucy. It would not become me to speak as if the best people were always the ones that married soonest. There is yourself; but then you are so hard to please. But it stands to reason in this case, don't you think, that the married one should be the chief? for it is her house, you know, and she is the mistress. Now, the tall one, whom you saw at the window, is evidently the principal; therefore she must be Mrs. Arthur. The little fat one seems a good little thing. She looks after everything, and helps to cook the dinner. The other—I wonder if she is a widow—does very little about the house. I see her reading, generally."

"You speak as if they had been the objects of your observation for years."

"No, not for years, of course; but when you live opposite to people for a fortnight, you find out a great deal about them. You know you have been away, Lucy. She reads a great deal, and I have seen her out sketching, and sometimes she talks to the poor people; but she looks shy and frightened. Whenever she sees me, she hurries away."

"And you have not called? I wonder you did not call, when you take so much interest in her," said Lucy, taking up her little basket again and preparing to go.

"Do you think I ought to call?" cried Cousin Julia, eagerly. "I have been turning it over and over in my own mind. I wonder if I ought to call, I have been saying to Sam. What would your mamma think, I wonder? You see, they have no introductions—no one to be, as it were, responsible for them; and they might be something very different; they might be not at all nice people, for anything we can tell."

"How unkind of you to imagine evil! Why shouldn't they be nice people? I am afraid you are beginning to be hard-hearted," said Lucy, laughing. "Mamma will be very much surprised to hear that you have not called, I am sure."

"Do you really think so. I am *dying* to call," cried Mrs. Rolt. "Hard-hearted—me! Oh, Lucy, how can you say so? when you know it is chiefly on your account, that your mamma may always be quite certain you will meet no one whom you ought not to meet here."

"I should like to meet her very much," said Lucy, offering her pretty cheek for Cousin Julia's kiss. "I shall come back for some luncheon, if you will have me, and then you can tell me all the rest. My people will be waiting now."

Mrs. Rolt stood at the window and looked after her admiringly as she went away. Such a young creature—to do so much—and to keep the parish together. But then the good woman reflected that she had now said this of Lucy for some years, and, counting back, decided that she must be twenty-three—not so very young to be still unmarried, for Sir John Curtis's daughter, who might marry anybody. "I wonder if there is *some one*," said Cousin Julia to herself, making a private review in her own mind of all the gentlemen she knew—which took her thoughts off the new-comer in Wren Cottage, though she might already be seen at the window gazing out

with a certain eagerness, and showing more than one ear.

Lucy went on her way with a little tremble of excitement about her, though she laughed at herself for this absurd fancy of hers about Mrs. Arthur. Why should she think of her brother's wife? She was not aware that Nancy had left Underhayes, or that anything had happened to the family; and it was too foolish to suppose that the unknown sister-in-law, who had left her husband and her duty rather than abandon her family, would have thrown them aside again aimlessly to come here. Why should she come here? She had shown no symptom of any desire to make herself acquainted with Arthur's home, but rather had defied and rejected everything that could connect her with it. And now, after all was over between them, why should she come now? Arthur was a quite well-known surname, as Mrs. Rolt said; and she rebuked herself for the fantastic idea with some vehemence. She went about her business, however, with a mind a little discomposed, feeling she knew not how—as if some new chapter had begun, and half expecting the new-comer to rise up in her path and interfere with her.

But Lucy's business went on as usual, without disturbance from any one. She held her usual business levee, receiving the little savings of the poor women, the scrapings of pennies and threepennies they could put aside for the children's frocks at Christmas, and heard all their stories of boys who were doing well, and boys who were doing ill, and girls that wanted "placing," and those that were going to learn the dress-making, or away to Oakenden to service. Many a domestic tale she had to hear and sympathize with, and had to make several promises to "speak to" unruly sons and husbands.

The village women had a great confidence in "somebody speaking to" those careless fellows, who would go with their wages to the public-house, instead of taking them home.

"It ain't that he's got a bad heart—but oh, Miss Lucy, he do want talking to!" they would say; and Lucy would request that the offending husband might be sent up to the Hall on some little commission, or inveigled in the afternoon into the school-room.

"But he's got that sharp, he won't go nigh the school-room now, as he knows as you're there, and what's a-coming," one of these plaintive wives said, shaking her head.

"Then you must say I want to speak to him," said Lucy; "don't make any pretence of business, but just say I want to see him up at the House. I will give him a little job to do for me, if he behaves himself rightly," said Lucy.

She had not, perhaps, so much faith in "talking to" as they had; but it was, at the worst, a flattering delusion, and the men themselves did not dislike the importance of the "talking to," which elevated them for the moment, though it was an undesirable elevation. She had come among them since she was a child. She had waged war with the public-house, since it was half a joke to hear her small denunciations, and both women and men had laughed and cried at Miss Lucy.

"Lord bless her! she do speak up bold," they *had said; and this* early interference had given *her a certain power, such as the* roughest ploughman will allow, holding his breath, to the child, who in baby rectitude and indignation may sometimes lecture a drunken father. She had done a great deal of business in this way before she went back to take luncheon with Cousin Julia, which was not one of the least of her kind offices.

You would have supposed Lucy was the most dainty of epicures, to see the little feasts Mrs. Rolt made for her on these parish days. Her husband was seldom at home at that hour, and Cousin Julia was ready to feed on nightingale's tongues, had they been procurable, the young Lady Bountiful who saved her from a solitary meal. And in the afternoon there were the schools to visit, and the little cottage hospital, and the cookery, and all that was going on for the good of her village subjects. Bertie, too, had a way of coming to Mrs. Rolt's on these parish days; and though she was not fond of him, she avowed, as she was of Lucy, yet Bertie was a cousin too, and it was not possible for the gentle soul to forbear from a little feeble essay at match-making when she saw these handsome young people together.

Bertie was not good enough for Lucy, but Lucy might like him, for all that. Things much more unlikely had been known; while it was probable, indeed, that he, only a clergyman, and humble-minded (perhaps), was afraid to venture to open his mind to Sir John's daughter. Mrs. Rolt felt that it was only doing as she would be done by—or rather as she would have been done by—to allow them to meet when they could. It was the Curtises who were her relations, not my lady; and she had a little natural opposition in her mind to Lucy's mother, who was understood to have little admiration for the rector. "I hope you will not mind, my love, but poor Bertie is coming to lunch," she said, in deprecating tones, on this particular "parish day."

"Why do you say 'poor Bertie?' I don't think he considers himself poor," said Lucy, half annoyed.

"Ah, my dear, he does not get everything he wishes for, any more than the rest of us in this world," Cousin Julia replied; and to such a very natural and likely fact what could any one say?

CHAPTER XXXV.

BERTIE came to luncheon; and he had things his own way with Cousin Julia, much more than he ever had at the Hall—especially when Mr. Rolt was absent. Mr. Hubert Curtis was permitted to lay down the law. On ordinary occasions he was in the habit of saying that all these shows of interference with the public-house were a piece of womanish nonsense, and did no good, and that the public-house had its place in society, as well as any other institution. But Lucy, being known to entertain strong opinions on this point, the rector modified his views, or at least the expression of them, when she was present. Sometimes, however, his indiscreet speeches during his absence were brought home to him, even by Cousin Julia's misdirected zeal and desire to show him at his cleverest.

"Tell Lucy what you were saying about interfering with the people's liberty," she said.

"I thought it was very clever, Bertie. I should like Lucy to know your way of thinking." At this Lucy pricked up her ears, and prepared for battle.

"It was nothing," said the rector, confused, and giving his simple patroness a murderous look. "Lucy knows that I don't go so far as she does in using the influence which our position gives us."

"Is it about The Curtis Arms?" said Lucy. "I know I would take away the license to-morrow, if I was papa."

"But, my dearest, your papa must know best. Bertie can tell you a great deal better than I can; but he says it is a pity to force the people even to do what is good."

"Perhaps," said Lucy, tossing back her small head and preparing for the contest. "But I should risk it. Let me force them to do right, if you call it forcing, and let Bertie leave them to take their own way, and just see at the end of six months which would be the most satisfactory. If Bertie," said the young parish potentate, relapsing into calm, and with a certainty which had some gentle scorn in it, "had worked in the parish as long as I have done—"

"One would think that had been a hundred years," said the rector, "and I yield to Lucy's experience, Cousin Julia. Besides, nothing that I should do, as you very well know, would interfere with Lucy. To us the legal means of maintaining order is by keeping up authority without interfering with freedom; but let her interfere with freedom as much as she pleases. Don't I know that there is not a man in the parish who does not like to be bullied by Miss Lucy?—not one that I know of," said the rector, with a little gentle emphasis. He meant to infer that he too was ready to be bullied, with that granting of all feminine eccentricities of influence which is the gentlemanly way of letting women know that they have no real right to interfere.

"I did not think I bullied any one," said Lucy, reddening. Perhaps she deserved this for her implied superiority over the rector in knowledge of the parish. But Mrs. Rolt here saw the mistake she had made, and rushed to the rescue.

"Dear, no! Bertie never thought so, my love. He is always saying what an influence you have, and always so beautifully employed. You must never live anywhere but in the country, Lucy. You could not have your poor people in a town, and you would miss them dreadfully. It gives one so many things to think of. And, Bertie, talking of things to think of, tell us about our new neighbors. You were talking to them yesterday, I heard from Fanny's mother. And Lucy is like myself—she is dying to know."

"You mean the ladies at the Wren Cottage? Yes, I saw them yesterday," said Bertie; but he showed no disposition to say more.

"Tell Lucy about them—she has not seen them. And which is Mrs. Arthur—the tall one, or the little one? And is she a widow? And if she is not a widow, is her husband coming, or where is he? And what put it into her head to come to Oakley? Lucy is quite interested, from what I told her; and she wants to know—"

"You must wait till I have mastered your questions before I can reply. Is it the tall one or the little one who *is* Mrs. Arthur? The tall one, I think. Is she a widow? I can't tell. She wears an odd sort of dress."

"It is more like a Sister's dress than a widow's. I know she wears a peculiar dress, Bertie. You need not tell me that. But you have talked to her—"

"Could I ask her if she was a widow, and if not, when her husband was coming, and why she came to Oakley? I can't interrogate new parishioners like that; and only a lady can find out such things. I don't know anything about them," said the rector, hastily. Evidently he had no wish to talk of them; and Lucy, looking at him keenly, set down this reluctance as a proof that he knew more than he said. This however, was not at all the case. The rector did not choose to speak of the new-comers, because he felt more interest in them than it was perhaps quite right to feel. He admired "the tall one" very much, and would have been rather glad to make sure that she was a widow. But, on the other hand, he did not want Lucy to suspect this, or to take the idea into her head that Mrs. Arthur was the object of his admiration. Was not Lucy herself his chief object? And if he could win her, it would be of very little importance about Mrs. Arthur. But in the mean time there seemed very little appearance of winning her, and Mrs. Arthur was interesting, and he had no desire to betray to Lucy that he found her so. In this, of course, the rector was very foolish, for if there had been any chance of awaking Lucy to pique or jealousy, nothing could have been more to his advantage than that he should allow her to perceive his interest in the new inhabitants; but few men are wise enough for this, and Bertie, to his credit be it said, had in such matters no wisdom at all.

He owed it, however, to the impression made upon her mind by his reticence that he could tell more about these strangers if he would, that Lucy almost invited his attendance on part of her way home.

"I will walk with you as far as our paths lie together," she said, as she met him at the door of her cookery school; and he turned with her, well content, though he had not intended to walk that way. Was Lucy coming round to a sense of his excellencies? he asked himself. It seemed "just like" one of the usual aggravating ways of Providence that this should come just as he began to feel a new interest stealing into his mind.

"Our paths lie together, as far as you will permit," he said, tempering, however, the largeness of this speech by a prudent limit. "I should like nothing better than to walk up the avenue with you this beautiful afternoon."

"Oh no, don't take that trouble," said Lucy. She wanted to question him, but she did not want so much of him as that; while, on the other hand, he, though conscious of the rising of a new interest, would on no account have done anything to spoil his chance with Lucy, had she shown the slightest appearance of turning favorable eyes on him. Whatever divergencies of sentiment there might be, Bertie knew well, without any foolishness, which was the right thing to do.

"How good of you to take so much pains with all these children!" he said. "Will they be really the better for it, I wonder? The cook

ing looked very nice; but will their fathers' dinners be the better?"

"Their fathers are prejudiced, and perhaps their mothers too. It is their husbands and their mistresses who will be the better. We must always consent to lose a generation," said Lucy, with youthful prudence. And he smiled. It was, perhaps, scarcely possible not to smile.

"Then if my uncle agreed with you," he said, "and the rest of us, the girls who are learning to broil and stew in your schools would make nice dinners for the boys, who never would have been allowed to have a glass of beer in The Curtis Arms; and then, the old generation once swept away, all would go well."

"Why not?" said Lucy; "but I do not wish to touch the old generation — if not for good, certainly not for evil. I would not sweep them away, but I don't hope to do much with them. Even the like of you and me," she said, with meaning, "though we are not old yet, are too old to take up with a new order of things. But, Cousin Bertie, it was something else I meant to say to you. I am not in a flutter of curiosity, like poor dear old Julia; but—you know something more about these ladies, I could see, than what you told us, at least."

"These ladies! What ladies?" he cried, a little confused by the question.

"The new people at Wren Cottage: Mrs.—Arthur, I think you call her."

"Oh!" he said, then made a little pause again, confirming all Lucy's suspicions, "indeed I don't know anything about them, more than I told you; why should I? I don't suppose there is anything to know; and if there is, why should I conceal it from you?"

But in his tone and in his look there was such a distinct intention of holding back something that Lucy was more certain of it than ever.

"Yes," she said, "why should you—from me? I felt there was something. If there is a mystery about them, surely, Bertie, I am the best person to confide it to. I think I have a right to know."

What could she mean? Did she mean that there being a secret understanding between them, any "new interest" on his part ought to be confided to her? The rector was profoundly puzzled. He had never said anything to Lucy, nor Lucy to him, to warrant such a pretension as this.

"Of course," he said, faltering, "you know that you are the first person I would confide in —if there was anything to confide. The idea that you care to know is too sweet to me, Lucy."

She looked him full in the face; asking, in her turn, what did he mean? Sweet to him—why should it be sweet to him? What was there in her question to give him this flattered yet confused look? She regarded him very gravely with inquiring, steady eyes.

"I think you must fail to understand my question," she said. "And of course I can't help being anxious. Tell me; there can be no possible reason," she added, with some impatience, "why you should not tell *me!*"

But there was something so comical in the perplexity which succeeded that expression of happy vanity in his face that Lucy laughed out.

"*I don't believe,* after all, you have anything *to tell," she said.*

"Not I—not a scrap of anything. What could I have to tell? what could they be to me? I have eyes only for one," said the rector, still somewhat confused, and taking rather awkward advantage of the opportunity. They were just then approaching the gate, and Lucy gave her head that little toss of impatience which he was acquainted with, perceiving, with some anger, her mistake.

"Here we are at the end of our joint road," she said, abruptly; "thank you for carrying my basket so far, Bertie. Oh no, I prefer to carry it myself. I cannot, indeed, let you take any further trouble. Good-morning. Papa expects you to-morrow, I believe."

"But that need not hinder me from coming now."

"Oh no, not at all, if you have any object in coming; but papa will be out, and you must not take any more trouble for me. Good-bye!" she said, abruptly, waving her hand to him. He had nothing to do but to acquiesce. He turned back, feeling that he had not come off well in the encounter. What did she mean? She was a troublesome squire's daughter as ever young rector was plagued with. She knew the parish better than he did, and took her own way in it, indifferent to his advice. She would not be guided, directed, nor made to see that he was the first person to be considered. And she would not be made love to—nor even receive compliments—much less consent that to settle down along with him in the Rectory, bringing with her all that Sir John could keep back from rebellious Arthur, was the natural arrangement. And, this being the case, if a "new interest" did enter his mind, why, in the name of everything that was mysterious, should she have a right to know it, and be the natural person to confide it to? He was more mystified and puzzled than words could say.

As for Lucy, she went on with a little tingling in her cheeks, feeling that she had made a mistake, but not clear as to what the mistake was. Could he think that it mattered to her whether he had eyes for one or half a dozen? What were his eyes to her? But still, though she did not see how what he said could bear upon the subject, there was certainly a little confusion about Bertie; he knew something about Mrs. Arthur, if not what she with so much excitement permitted herself to suspect.

It was a lovely October evening, with a sunset coming on which blazed behind the woods. The sunset is, perhaps, the one only scenic representation of which we are never tired. Lucy went on looking at it, lost in the beauty of it, as if she had never seen one before. There was a deep band of crimson round the lower horizon, all broken as it was with masses of trees, and rosy clouds flung about to all the airts stained into every gradation of red, till the color melted in an ethereal blush upon the blue. And between the crimson below and the rose tints above, how the very sky itself changed into magical tones of green, and faint lights of yellow, far too visionary to be called by such vulgar names!

She went on slowly, her face turned towards it, and illuminated by the light: "Beginning to sink in the light he loves on a bed of daffodil sky," she was saying to herself. At such moments there are thoughts which will intrude

even into the peacefullest soul, thoughts of some one absent—of something lost—if there should happen to be anything lost or absent in our lives: and even with those who are altogether happy, a sweet pretence at unhappiness will invade the heart; the hour which turns the traveller's desire homeward that day when he has bidden sweet friends farewell. All this was in Lucy's head and in her heart, and she forgot what she had been so curious about only a few minutes before.

A path struck from the avenue across the Park, not much beyond the gate. Some sound of crackling twigs under passing footsteps disturbed her with the moisture, scarcely to be called tears, standing in her eyes. She half turned her head, and saw two figures against the light, one taller, the other shorter—figures unknown to her, who knew everybody. Without intending it, Lucy made a half pause of suspicion, which looked almost like a question—though that was quite unintended too, for it was a thoroughfare, and she had neither the wish nor the right to interfere with any one who might be there. The strangers had long wreaths of the wild clematis flowered out, with its great downy seed-pods, and some clusters of scarlet and yellow leaves in their hands. They made a little alarmed pause too, and there was a kind of stumbling retreat backward, and a momentary consultation. Lucy went on, but in a moment more paused again, at the sound of some one pattering after her over the carpet of fallen leaves.

"Oh! if you please—"

Lucy turned round. It was a comely young woman who stood before her, in mourning, a little flush upon her face, her breath coming quick with the running. She was little and plump, a kind, good-tempered, homely little person, with good sense in her face.

"I hope we are not trespassing. I hope if we were trespassing you will forgive us, please, for we did not mean it. We are strangers here. All this is rubbish," she said, looking down upon the leaves in her hands; "not even flowers. We thought it was no harm to pick them; they took my sister's fancy, they were so bright-colored. I hope we have done nothing wrong."

The English was good enough, the h's faint, yet not markedly absent; but the voice was not the voice of a lady: this Lucy divined at once.

"The road is free to every one," she said; "you are not trespassing; and you are quite welcome to the leaves. They are beautiful; you have very good taste to like them—but of course they are of no use."

"Oh, they are of no use," said the little woman; "it is my sister. She draws them sometimes. Indeed, she paints them quite nicely, as like as possible. She takes such great pains."

"Is she an artist?" said Lucy. It seemed necessary to say something, for the stranger, with her good-humored face, stood still expecting a reply.

"Oh no; she does not require to do anything. She does it for her pleasure. She has a great deal of education—now." This was said with a look of some alarm behind her. Lucy turned and looked too; the other taller figure in sombre black garments had already reached the gate.

"It must be you who have come to the Wren Cottage," *she said;* "every one is known and talked about in a village: is it you that are Mrs. Arthur, or the other lady? I will come and see you, if you will allow me, on my next parish-day."

"O-oh!" The plump young woman gave a startled cry. "My sister is not seeing anybody." Then her countenance recovered a little, and she said, "But I shall be glad—very glad to see you. Of course if she wishes to shut herself up, she can go up-stairs."

"I should not like to intrude upon any one," said Lucy, with a smile. She was a princess in her own kingdom, and no one could affront her. The idea, indeed, amused rather than offended her, that *she* could be supposed to intrude upon any one in Oakley. The notion was delightfully absurd.

"Not intrude—oh, dear no, not intrude; but she has had a deal of trouble," said the stranger, "a great deal of trouble. If she could be persuaded to see—any one, it would do her good."

"I will come," said Lucy, with a friendly nod. She did not require to stand upon any ceremony with this homely little person; "and in the mean time the road across the Park is quite free. Good-day," she said, smiling. All other fancies flew away out of her mind at the sight of this rational, commonplace little person. She was not vulgar, certainly not vulgar, for there was no pretension in her; but certainly not in the least like— Lucy had seen the Bateses, the family of Arthur's wife; she had seen Sarah Jane in her cheap finery, and the mother in her big bonnet and shawl. Nothing could be more unlike them than this sensible little person, in her plain neat mourning-dress. She had seen them but for a few minutes, it is true; but the recollection of florid beauty, of flowers and ribbons, and flimsy fine dresses, and boisterous manners of the free-and-easy kind, was strong upon her; and this little woman was quite sensible and simple. What fantastic notions people take into their heads! There was evidently no mystery or difficulty here, she said to herself, smiling, as, nodding again to the new-comer, she resumed her walk at a quicker pace, and made her way henceforth undisturbed to the Hall.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

"Why did you speak to her? Why didn't you just make our excuses and come on?" said the younger to the elder. "I thought you would never be done talking."

"I wanted to see her; I wanted to make out what kind of girl she was; and I will tell you this, she is a nice girl. No more stuck-up than I am. A nice, smiling, pleasant girl, not a bit proud; not half nor a quarter so proud as you are, Nancy."

"*H-hush!* Don't call me by that name. Can't you understand that is the only name they know? Call me Anna, and it will not matter; they would never think of that in connection with me."

"Why should they think anything about you?" said Matilda. "A young lady like Miss Curtis, why should she trouble her head with new people coming into the village? or what would make her think of you? You know the reason why

you came here, because it was the very last place Arthur would think of looking for you; though, indeed, he has not troubled you much with looking for you," she added, in a lower voice.

"You are very unfeeling," said Nancy, with a quiver on her lip.

For it would be in vain to attempt to delude the reader into the idea that this tall young lady in mourning who had taken the Wren Cottage, and was called Mrs. Arthur, was anybody but Nancy. Her disguise was transparent, indeed, to any one whose suspicions had ever been awakened, and the very transparence of her disguise was part of the character of the girl, who had suffered a great deal indeed, and learned something, but who was still herself at bottom, notwithstanding the progress she had made. She had made a great deal of progress. She had read numbers of very heavy, very solid books, and could have passed an examination on various abstruse subjects which never could be of the slightest service to her. How was the poor girl to know? She was aware that reading books was the way to be educated, and she was too proud to be guided by anybody who knew better than she did. She had devoured a great deal of poetry, and many novels as well; though these she was rather ashamed of. But she knew that it must be right to work through the "Encyclopædia," and to read history, and "Locke upon the Human Understanding," and other volumes of solid reputation. No doubt they did her good, more or less, and the very effort to read them did her good. And she knew now all about those things which had puzzled her so much at Paris—about the queen who was murdered, and the people whose heads were cut off; and had gone over all the collections of pictures open in London, and knew now, at least, the names of the painters with whom people are generally enraptured.

Her mistakes in the old days thus gave her a certain enlightenment, revealing to her certain points on which she was very ignorant, and which it was right to know; but beyond these limits Nancy had not much information as to what was wanted for the education of a lady, and stumbled along in the dark, though with the best will in the world. But the occupation which this gave her was of the utmost importance to her, and had softened and consolidated her whole moral being. Further, she had tried music, which comes into the most elementary conception of a lady's training, but had found this very hard work, neither her fingers nor her patience being equal to the strain upon them; but she had managed better with drawing, and had made a great many elaborate pencil copies, and some in chalk, which Matilda thought beautiful.

When her father and mother both died, it was impossible to keep her longer in Underhayes. No one had any longer the smallest control over her. Matilda, though she was sensible, had never taken any lead in the family, and, though she criticised, always obeyed the more potent impulse of her younger sister. Nancy had been as impulsive and imprudent in her present action as in all the previous movements of her life. She had given up her income from Arthur without telling any one, to the great dismay of her sisters. *"What are you to live on?" they had both cried, with horror and alarm.* But Nancy was not to be talked to then more than at other periods. She had informed them that she meant to live on her own little infinitesimal fortune, the two hundred and fifty pounds her aunt had left her; and in answer to all their representations that this would last a very short time, she would deign no reply. She had determined to do it, and that was enough—as she had determined to do other foolish things. Matilda had come with her in the spirit of a martyr. "We must do something to make our own living when she has spent it all," Matilda said, "and I won't forsake her."

Thus Nancy carried out her foolish intention. She was independent for the moment, obliged to nobody, whatever might happen to-morrow or next year. Two hundred and fifty pounds seems a large sum to the inexperienced. And as to the reason why she came to Oakley, it would have been still more difficult to tell that. Because it was the last place in the world where Arthur would be likely to find her, she said. Was it not, rather, because when Arthur came to find her (as she had no doubt he would, as soon as he heard "what had happened"), she would not permit herself to be found at Underhayes, yet would not either put herself out of his way?

However, Nancy did not herself know what she meant upon this point. A great many confused and inarticulate feelings were in her mind. Her heart yearned towards her husband, whom she had loved in her way. Only when she had driven him from her had she realized how much he was to her; and though far too proud to make any overtures of reconciliation, all her forlorn studies, her foolish self-trainings, had been one long silent overture, had anybody known. And now to come to the neighborhood of his home, to hear of him, to see the people whom she had stigmatized so often as fine folks (how the educated Nancy blushed now at such a vulgar expression!), seemed the greatest attraction in the world to her. She would not put herself in the way of being noticed by them, but she would not, on the other hand, make any violent effort to keep out of their way; and there was something that pleased her fantastic condition of mind in the mere idea of living there, unknown, yet not too carefully concealed, indifferent as to whether she was found out or not; unrevealed, yet not disguised. She would not change her name. She was Mrs. Arthur, and there she would stay as Mrs. Arthur. If she were discovered, she was harming no one. She had a right to live there if she pleased.

Thus, half in longing, half in defiance, Nancy took up her abode in the little cottage called, nobody knew why, the Wren Cottage, probably because it was not much bigger than a wren's nest. Perhaps it had not occurred to her how much discussion would be raised in the tranquil little village by her arrival as a stranger; perhaps she did not care whether she was talked of or not. Indeed, she did not think on the subject, but only wondered with all her mind whether they would find her out, whether they would not find her out, what they would think of her; but never asked herself, as Matilda said, why they should think of her at all. This, it was to be feared, was not at all a thing desirable to Nancy.

That they should inquire about her, wonder who she was, suspect her, recognize her, these

were the things she preferred to imagine, and which it pleased her to brood over. Lucy had seen her, and very likely would recognize her. She was sure she would recognize Lucy wherever she might see her. It was exciting to meet her in the avenue as they approached, and Nancy had a secret pleasure in sending Matilda to apologize and explain, although she was quite well aware that the thoroughfare was a public one, and that nobody could interfere with their movements. Though she would not let Matilda see it, she was trembling with suppressed excitement when her sister rejoined her. Nothing could happen in consequence of such a meeting; Lucy could not have divined who she was, by the distant vision of her figure against the light, or through Matilda, whom she had never seen; but yet the wilful, headstrong girl, who had resisted so much, trembled at this chance encounter. She went back to the Wren Cottage afterward, excited and tingling all over; yet feeling a blankness in the air, as if all the color and expectation had passed away.

The Wren Cottage was very small. The door opened direct into the sitting-room, without any passage or antechamber. Nancy of two years ago would have thought it very common, but Nancy of to-day, knowing a little about art in respect to modern dwelling-places, supposed it must be "quaint," and called it so. A wooden staircase led up into the bedrooms. There was a deep recessed window at the side, which gave a little more pretension to the room, and commanded the road as far as the Hall gates, and some small portion of the avenue. Here Nancy had ranged her books in the window-sill. They were of a very heterogeneous description. There was a French book—something about the Revolution—which she was reading "for practice;" and there was a philosophical work which she read, because she thought that was the right thing to do; but a little of it went a long way. Thus the few volumes which she liked made an imperfect balance with a great many which she did not like, but worked at conscientiously, as understood to be the proper means for her purpose. Her present solid study was of the most heterodox character, and might have compromised Nancy's "soundness" in doctrine, had there been any critic here apt to judge, and might have confused her own brain, poor girl! had she paid any attention to it. But she used the book just as she used a chair—the one was to read, the other to sit down in; and Nancy did not trouble her mind about the one more than about the other. Besides these studies, there was a large cartoon in chalk hung up against the side of the window, which she was copying so carefully that it made one's fingers ache to see. When she came in from her walk, however, Nancy put down her podded clematis, and all the autumnal leaves in her hands, upon the window-sill, and arranged them somewhat mechanically, yet with a certain grace, upon a large sheet of paper, where she partly traced, partly drew them as they lay. This was her fancy—and she thought it very frivolous and childish; not at all a thing that had to do with the formation of the character, like the cartoon in chalk.

While Nancy settled her wreath to her satisfaction, Matilda made the tea. They had carpeted the little room with a common carpet all of one color, ornamented with a narrow border. Among Nancy's books there had been some which treated this question, and she had given to it a solemnity of consideration which might have satisfied the most severe critic. The little table in the middle of the room had a cover to correspond; the stairs had the same red carpeting, and there were similar curtains at the broad lattice window looking out to the street.

This was but an elementary stage of decoration, but how important it seemed in Nancy's eyes! as important as Queen Marie Antoinette, and the fact, which she had learned so painfully, that old pictures were generally considered better than new ones. She was ashamed of herself as she painted her leaves very rapidly, and with a blush on her face, thinking it mere childishness, and when she read a novel, or even a new poem. But to keep Matilda from placing the chairs against the walls, and to keep the same color in all the accessories of the room, that was serious. It was one of her proofs that she was becoming a real lady, and was no longer ignorant, fond of everything new and gaudy, as she had been, alas! when Arthur was with her. Everything was changed and mended now.

The tea went rather against Nancy's notions of what she ought to be doing in her present state of self-culture. She ought to be preparing for dinner. But then there were practical considerations which told against the theory here. Fanny, the little maid, came only in the morning; and "late dinner," that distinguishing feature in the life of "the gentry," would require cooking before it was eaten; and they both preferred tea; and it was much cheaper, and caused less trouble; and, lastly, no one visited them to see that they did not dine. Nancy was not indisposed to call the dinner "luncheon" that day the rector had called.

As it was, she sat down to her bread-and-butter with sufficient content. She had a great deal to do; and, notwithstanding her precarious condition, separated from her husband, without an income, and living upon her little capital, she was not unhappy. She was too busy to be unhappy. She had been quite unfit to be Arthur's companion when they were together; and there was so much to do to qualify herself for that post. But when the Curtises saw that she could draw so well, and that her room was so artistic, and that she had read so many books, what could they think but that she was truly a lady? And Arthur would come home for her, and all would be well. These hopes were in her mind as she read, and as she drew. She was occupied, and there was hope in her, and no one to cross her. Accordingly Nancy was not unhappy.

"I shouldn't wonder at all if Miss Curtis was to call—she said something about it. Will you see her, or will you not see her? I said I was not sure you would like it."

"Matilda, that was rude!"

"Nothing of the sort—what could I say? I couldn't tell her, 'Nancy don't want to be seen.'"

"Don't call me Nancy, please!"

"Well, Anna, then; but I never can recollect. I said I didn't know if you would like it; but anyhow you could go up-stairs if you didn't like it."

"She must think me a pretty bear. She did not ask you—what your sister's name was, nor where she came from, nor—anything about her?"

"Not a word. Why should she? You didn't show at all. When you are seen you are a deal more interesting than me, I don't deny it."

"Please!" said Nancy, clasping her hands, "don't say 'a deal,' and 'more interesting than me.'"

"What should I say?" said the good-humored Matilda. "It is a good thing I am not nervous. When she comes, you can run up-stairs. You can listen over the balusters, and hear all she is saying; and if you like her talk, you can come down next time. After all, Nancy, if you had not imagined that we would see them, why should we have come here?"

"But she will know me," said Nancy; "she saw me once—"

"On your wedding-day! You don't think you are a bit like the same person in that funny, stiff little cap and white collar, as you were in your wedding-dress with your veil? I don't think Arthur himself would know you," said her sister, frankly. Nancy winced at this, in spite of herself. She did not want to be so changed as this. That she might be changed a little; that there might be a difficulty in recognizing her, and a sense of mystery exciting their curiosity before they found her out—that would be nothing but pleasant; but to be so unlike herself as not to be recognized, even by Arthur, was not in her thoughts.

It was Matilda's part to put the tea away, as it had been hers to make it. There was no question between them of their different positions. Matilda yielded to Nancy all that the other could require. It was not hers—Heaven forbid it!—to read these big books, to think so much about everything, to take such trouble to learn drawing, and to understand the arrangements of a room. But she liked getting the tea, and putting the things away, though she was apt to make Nancy angry by setting the chairs straight against the wall. And then they sat at the table with the lamp between them, Matilda with her needle-work, Nancy reading her French for practice. Perhaps in her heart the elder sister might be sighing for the friendliness of Underhayes, where she could steal out in the evening and go through the blazing gas in Raisins's shop into the comfortable little parlor, to have a chat with Sarah Jane; but, on the whole, they were not at all unhappy. All the energies of Nancy's active mind were fixed upon her French. She could now, she thought, understand very well all that was said to her, if ever she went to France again; and understand the plays, and know what everything was about. Thus she revolved in her narrow circle, preparing for those contingencies which had once happened, and still hopeful that they were the same which would happen again.

But Nancy was taking a little rest from her occupations, painting again her tangled wreath of autumn leaves, but rather disposed to throw something over it, perhaps one of those wretched antimacassars, which proved her (though she did not know it) to be still in the land of bondage—*for even Matilda, who entertained a profound admiration for the chalk cartoon,* considered the other rubbish—when next morning there came a soft knock to the front-door. Matilda opened it so quickly that her sister had neither time to disappear nor even to conceal her occupation, when Mrs. Rolt's pleasant, middle-aged face appeared at the door.

"I am Mrs. Rolt, a very near neighbor. May I come in and see Mrs. Arthur, if she is at home?" said Cousin Julia. Her soft eyes were quite keen with curiosity. She glanced to the very background of the picture, the depth of the recess in which Nancy stood, with her pencils in her hand. Her figure looked taller than it was in the long clinging black gown; and the little close cap of transparent net on her head looked like a piece of conventual costume; and she wore a jet cross at her neck, which increased this effect. Mrs. Rolt thought she was like the mysterious lady in a novel with an interesting secret. She looked at Nancy, though Matilda stood so much the nearest. "I don't even know which is Mrs. Arthur," she said, with one of her ingratiating smiles. Nancy came forward, laying down the pencils. She made a nondescript kind of salutation, half bow, half courtesy, to the stranger. It was awkward and shy, but it was not ungraceful. Matilda only smiled cordially, which answered the purpose quite as well, it must be allowed; but there was no likelihood that Matilda would ever be an ambassador's wife, called upon by her duty to be solemnly civil to all the world. "I am so glad to make your acquaintance," said Mrs. Rolt: "I dare say you see me sometimes, as I see you. I have often and often looked across; and I should have called, but I was afraid you might think I was intruding. However, being told yesterday—that is Miss Curtis, whom you are sure to have heard of, told me that I ought to come; and I was very glad to hear her say so. Have you met any of the Curtises, Mrs. Arthur? They are, as of course you know, the chief people here."

"I have met—one of the family; long ago," said Nancy, trembling as she said it. But she could not restrain herself, for she suddenly felt that she must hear of Arthur or die.

"Have you, indeed? I wonder what one that would be. I should not wonder if it were Arthur—Arthur is the one that has been most in the world. And oh, such a sad fate for him, poor fellow! He married some common girl or other—I don't mean to say anything against her character, you know; but she was not a lady. And after a while he had to separate from her. Such a sad business! And poor dear Arthur was the nicest boy, poor fellow! I suppose you must have met him in London. How interested poor dear Lady Curtis will be!"

"Oh, don't say I met him!" cried Nancy, whose cheeks were burning. "It—might not be the same; it might be a mistake. Was he—not happy—with his wife?"

Matilda got behind Mrs. Rolt, and made a warning sign to her sister. Nancy's eyes were blazing, her face suffused with crimson. Any spectator less placid and unobservant would have fathomed her secret at once.

"Oh, poor fellow! he was dreadfully in love with her, I believe, as young men so often are when they marry out of their own station; but they separated, you know, so I suppose they can't have been happy. We expected them down

here, and all sorts of preparations were made, and dear Lady Curtis so much excited. And then, all at once, everything was countermanded, and poor Arthur came down by himself, looking very wretched, poor fellow! I wonder often if they will ever come together again. It seems such a pity—a young man with everything before him! But, of course, this puts a stop to his life. What can he do, cut off from everything? For people don't care to encourage in society an attractive young man like that who is married, and yet isn't married, as it were. Ah!" said Mrs. Rolt, drawing a long breath, "how I run on! As if you, who are strangers to the place, could be as interested about the Curtises as we are. It is very good of you to listen, I am sure."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

Nancy's agitation after this interview with Mrs. Rolt was great. It had never occurred to her before to think of the feelings which might legitimately affect Arthur's family and friends in respect to her marriage. That they "looked down upon" her—despised her as a poor girl, sneered at her as not a lady, was comprehensible enough, and waked her to a wild defiance. It was this that roused the principle that she was "as good as they were!" in her undisciplined bosom, and led to all the subsequent woes. But when she heard thus simply what was the state of feeling on the other side, and especially the lamentation over Arthur's spoiled life with which Mrs. Rolt had concluded, Nancy's heart, which had been tremulously confident, began to sink. If this was how it was—and of course this must be how it was—could he forgive her for having by her perversity doomed him to such a fate? She had thought of him often jealously, as "enjoying himself" in the unknown society of which she knew nothing; but it had never occurred to her that Arthur was in a false position in that society, a married man, yet not a married man; better off, no doubt, than a woman in the same position, yet but poorly off, all the same; looked upon doubtfully, not belonging to one class or another. Was this what she had sentenced him to? Had she been reasonable, had she come with him when Lady Curtis had made all those preparations for her reception, all this might have been avoided. It gave her a strange thrill to think that Lady Curtis, who was now so near her, had made preparations to receive her, and had even herself been agitated by the thought of meeting her son's wife.

"If I went now and told her, what would she say?" Nancy asked herself. That would be entirely different. Arthur's wife formerly had a right to everything. Arthur's wife now, what had she a right to? Nothing but the dislike and opposition of Arthur's family. She was a stranger to them—an enemy!

"If it takes effect on you like this, just to see one that knows them, even though she don't belong to them," said Matilda, "what will they do to you if they come themselves? And that young lady said she would come herself—and oh! hasn't she got quick eyes? She'll read you all through and through in a moment."

"Let me alone," said Nancy; "do you think I care who comes? I have more control over myself than you think."

"I'd like to see some more signs of it," said Matilda. "I thought you had mended of your silly ways; but here you are again, walking up and down and rampaging as bad as you were at home. If this is all to begin over again at the first mention of Arthur, whatever in all the world did you leave Arthur for?"

"Because I was mad, I think," said Nancy.

"Well, that was always my opinion. Your husband, a nice, well-dispositioned young man, that would have done anything to please you! and all for us at home, that were fond of you, to be sure, but didn't want you very much, Nancy."

"You are cruel, very cruel, to tell me so," cried Nancy, "to tell me now!"

"Well, now is the only time I could have told you," said Matilda, composedly. "I wouldn't have said it then to hurt your feelings; but you can't blame poor old father and mother now, and it is quite true. When a daughter has married and gone off with a husband, who wants her back again at home? But nobody would be unkind and hurt your feelings; and now you hear the same from the other side. When married folks are separated, what can any one think but that there's something wrong? on one side or on the other side, it's all one. But between you there's nothing wrong, only your tempers—only *your* temper, Nancy, I should say, for Arthur, I will say that for him, always stood a deal more than he ought to have stood, a deal more than I'd have stood in his place."

Nancy made no reply. She retreated into her recessed window, and put down her head into her hands among all the "rubbish" of autumn leaves which Matilda was so severe upon, and cried. It was all true. So long as her father and mother lived, there had been a kind of anchor to her wayward soul in the thought that Arthur and his family had slighted and condemned them, whom she was bound to defend and vindicate; and this gave a certain reason and excuse for her own conduct, which of itself did not bear any cooler examination.

Her books, from which she had acquired such strange bits of heterogeneous information, had not guided her much in the way of thought; but to be at a distance from any exciting period of individual history is of itself sufficient to throw a cold gleam of uncomfortable light upon it—light which we would in most cases elude if we could. Nancy had eluded it by impulsive action after the change which had compelled her to think—the two deaths which threw her, as it were, adrift upon the world. She had rushed at one thing and another, given up her allowance, resigned her villa, removed here, without leaving herself much time to consider; but now the retarded moment could be held off no longer, and she was obliged to think.

There was not much that was satisfactory in the retrospect. Was it possible that they had not wanted her at home, and that she had spoiled Arthur's life as well as her own? For what? She could not tell. Because his family "looked down upon her;" because he objected to live in Underhayes; because she was foolish, hot-headed, unreasonable. And now what prospect was there that the husband whom she had thus slighted, and his family whom she had defied and

wounded through him, would be ready to forgive, to take her into favor? A temporary despair came over Nancy. The first time that an impetuous young mind sees its own faults, and thoroughly disapproves of itself, what a moment that is! Reproof of others most generally brings with it an impulse of self-defence which defeats self-judgment; but when first, in the silence, unaccused of any one, the soul rises up and judges itself, what a pang is there in the always tardy conviction — too late, perhaps, late always, after suffering and making to suffer—distracted in the best cases with the desperate question whether there may still be a place of repentance.

Matilda, sitting calmly at her needle-work, had not the least idea what passionate despairings were in Nancy's mind as she sat there and cried. What was to become of her? The elder sister had been anxious enough over that question when Nancy was so foolish as to give up her allowance. Matilda herself had settled to join Charley in New Zealand, where useful young women like herself were, she knew, wanted, as men's wives and in other domestic capacities; but she would not forsake her foolish sister, and now Matilda awaited with sufficient composure the solution of the question, What was to become of them? If, when their transparent secret was found out, the Curtises showed themselves willing to take charge of Arthur's wife, Matilda intended to give her so very distinct a piece of her mind that there could no longer be any possibility of self-deception on the part of Nancy, and to lay before her then and there the option of return to her duties or immediate emigration; but, in the mean time, until this crisis arrived, the sensible Matilda could wait. She was working quietly at her own outfit for New Zealand at this very moment, while Nancy studied her books, or drew, or "played" with the "rubbish" which littered the room.

Matilda, like most people, had a respect for education, and perhaps there might be good in all that; but while this fantastic, undirected preparation for something, she could not tell what, was going on with Nancy, Matilda made those matter-of-fact preparations which can never be without their use. She made her chemises for the voyage while the other tried to make herself "a lady." The one attempt might fail, but not the other; and thus she worked on steadily, altogether unconscious of the wild surgings of despair and self-condemnation in Nancy's mind. Matilda did not know what these sentiments were. She herself had always done her duty, and as for Nancy, she had been very silly, and there was an end of it. If she persevered in being silly, Matilda had fully settled within herself that she would take the command of affairs, and bring the fantastic young woman to her senses by giving her at least a piece of her mind.

Things went on this way for a week or two after Mrs. Rolt's visit: nothing further occurred to disturb the sisters in their stillness, and Nancy at least required the stimulation of some new thing. She got into despair about her reading, her conscientious pursuit of knowledge and accomplishments. If things were always to go on as now, what was the good? Every day she got up hoping that something might happen, some encounter that would quicken the blood in her veins; *but nothing happened.* It was rainy weather, and not even a hair-breadth escape of meeting Lucy, or any chance of being recognized —that danger which she professed to fear, and secretly longed for—had ever happened.

The village life was very dull and still, and the sisters had no natural distractions, no breaks upon the heaviness and monotony of the rainy autumn days. To Matilda, indeed, it was occupation enough to get on steadily with her chemises, and she even rejoiced in the quiet which permitted her to "get so much done." But Nancy, even without the sense of uncertainty in her fate which made her restless, was not sufficiently placid of nature to have lived without break or change; and her whole scheme of living, artificial as it had been from the beginning, was disorganized and broken up. She had hoped everything at first, making a little romance of the story: how Arthur would come to seek her as soon as he knew of "what had happened;" how, failing to find her at Underhayes, he would rush everywhere to look for her, advertise for her, pursue her far and near; how he would come sadly home to tell his mother that his Nancy was lost forever and his heart broken; and then would find her, turning all trouble into joy.

This was the fancy the foolish girl had cherished in her heart; but there was no sign or appearance that anything would come of it. On the contrary, she began to perceive something like the real state of affairs; she saw what she had brought upon her husband by her causeless abandonment of him, and something of the light in which her conduct must appear to others; and how could she be sure that he was now ready to pardon, ready to open his arms to her again? This thought disturbed all Nancy's confidence in her progress, in her reading, her French, her beautifully shaded *étude*. What folly these labors would all turn to if he despised them, and had no interest in her improvement! It could do her no good to be a lady unless she was reconciled to Arthur; and what if to be reconciled was no longer Arthur's desire?

Mrs. Rolt, however, for her part, was most agreeably moved and excited by the new neighbors, to whom her visit had brought excitement of so different a kind. She hurried out to the Hall to tell the story in her water-proof and galoches. It was too wet for Lucy to venture to the village; but Cousin Julia could have ventured anywhere in the strength of such a piece of news as she had now to carry. She told how she had gone to call, chiefly moved by Lucy's encouragements.

"For I thought if Lucy thought it was the right thing to do, you must have thought so, dear Lady Curtis; and of course you know better than I do. There is something very strange about them. The married one is quite different from the other. I am sure she is a most accomplished person, very handsome. I should think she must be something very artistic, and perhaps she has been on the stage. Oh no, she did not say anything to make me think that; but there is something about her — very handsome, with such a lovely complexion, and fine eyes and hair; but the other is quite homely, a nice sort of little friendly woman. My own opinion, if you ask me," said Mrs. Rolt, mysteriously, "is that she's not a widow. *I* should say, Mr. Arthur, whoever he may be, is no better

than he should be; and he has broken his poor wife's heart, and driven her away from him—that's my idea. Sam says 'Fudge!' but then he is always saying 'Fudge.' I wish I knew the rights of the story; and you will see, it will turn out something like what I say."

"On the stage—was the young woman on the stage? I hope she will not introduce any taste for that kind of thing in the village," said Sir John, who had come in as usual for his cup of tea.

"Oh dear, no—no, I did not mean that. She is only the kind of mysterious, lovely young creature—so superior, and yet with such a homely sister; and so handsome—and all alone, you know—that might have been on the stage, as you read in books; something quite romantic, and so interesting, like a novel!" cried Mrs. Rolt.

"I hope it may come to the third volume and entertain us all," said Lady Curtis. "We want a little amusement this rainy weather. Perhaps the husband will turn up, and prove to be handsome and superior too; or perhaps she will hear of his death—what is the matter, Lucy? You have spilled your tea over my crewels!"

"No, I only scalded my fingers a little. I don't like to hear you settling all about the husband, as if we were quite sure he was the one to blame."

"Ah, well!" said Lady Curtis, with a sigh. It brought another story to her mind, as no doubt it had done to Lucy's; and after this no more was said. To be sure, Mrs. Rolt said to herself, as she drove home in the brougham which Lady Curtis (always so kind!) insisted upon having out for her—it was not, perhaps, right to talk of anything that could recall poor Arthur's sad circumstances. But then this was evidently so different, such an interesting young creature! and dear Sir John had been quite amused.

The next bright day after this, Lady Curtis and her daughter were both in the village. After the first outburst of autumn rains a bright day is very tempting; and the walk down the avenue was pleasant, and the village basked in the sunshine with genuine enjoyment, as if the old red houses knew how expedient it was to make the most of the little warmth and brightness which remained possible. Lady Curtis sat at Cousin Julia's window while she waited for Lucy, and looked out, not without satisfaction, upon the village, tranquil as it was. To see the women at their doors, courtesying to the rector as he passed, and the children getting out of his way, and the cart with baskets, conducted by two hoarse and strident tramps, which was at that moment making a triumphal progress through the street, was a change from the sodden green of the park, as seen from the long windows of the morning room. She was a woman whom it was easy to amuse, and this simple variety pleased her. She was looking out with a smile on her face at this rural scene, when the sudden appearance of two unknown figures surprised her; and when Bertie stopped to speak to them with much appearance of cordiality and interest, Lady Curtis was interested.

"Who are these?" she asked, with the ready curiosity of a great county lady, almost affronted that *any new individual* unknown to her should appear, as it were, in the very streets of her metropolis without her leave. "I never saw Bertie so eager before; he looks as if he had forgotten for the moment that he himself must be the first person to be thought of. Who is she, Julia?" cried Lady Curtis.

Mrs. Rolt came hastily from the other end of the room, where she had been making the tea.

"Oh, that is the mysterious stranger—that is Mrs. Arthur—that is the lovely creature I told you so much about. Don't you think she is very handsome—don't you think she is interesting? I am so glad you have seen her! Yes, Bertie is very civil to them. He is going back to their door with them; but they never ask him in. I must say there never was anything more prudent. They never encourage him to come; and though he is the rector, he is a young man, you know, and agreeable. I should certainly say Bertie was agreeable, if my opinion was of any weight."

"So that is your mysterious young woman?" said Lady Curtis. "No, Julia, no, she has never been on the stage. They never walk like that when they have been on the stage. She doesn't know how to walk; but there is a kind of gracefulness about her. I cannot say if she is handsome or not; but what can such a woman as that possibly want here?"

"That is just what I never could make out," said Cousin Julia, delighted to open forth on her favorite subject. Nancy just then turned round, unconscious of the eyes bent upon her, to look at the cart with the baskets, and thus exposed herself unawares to the full gaze of her husband's mother. Her long black dress gave a certain dignity to her figure, calling attention by its very plainness, and so did the little close black bonnet with its edge of white which encircled her face. Nancy in her ordinary garb and ordinary moods never had looked half so distinguished or lovely. Lady Curtis could not take her eyes from this face so softly tinted, so purely fresh and severely framed.

"Why didn't you tell me before? The girl is a beauty!" she said.

"A beauty!" said Lucy, coming into the room; and she, too, gazed from behind her mother's shoulder. Had she ever seen that face before? she asked herself, with an anxiety which neither of the others divined. She had seen it only once, for a minute or two, surrounded by clouds of bridal white. Was it likely she could recognize it now in this almost conventual severity of costume? She dropped behind her mother, half satisfied, half disappointed, and paid no attention to the further comments of Lady Curtis, which delighted Mrs. Rolt. If it was no one she had ever seen before, what did it matter to Lucy who it was? But when the two ladies had left Cousin Julia, after they had taken a few steps on the way home, Lady Curtis came to a sudden pause.

"Don't you think, Lucy," she said, in a conciliatory tone, "that it would be only kind to call upon those new people? They must feel very strange in this quiet place; and as she really seems a lady—"

"I am quite willing to go, mamma," said Lucy, feeling her heart beat more quickly in spite of herself.

"But don't you think it is only a duty?" said

Lady Curtis. She wanted to be persuaded that she ought to go—not to go merely because she was curious, which was the real reason; but when Lucy returned no further answer, her mother, making use of her own impatience of temper as a reason for doing what she wanted, turned sharp round with a little show of annoyance at Lucy, and went straight across to the cottage door. Cousin Julia saw her, and almost clapped her hands with pleasure, as she lurked behind the curtains and watched; and the two people in the Wren Cottage, who had been watching also from their windows since they came in, saw her too, and prepared for the visit with excitement indescribable. Lady Curtis's movements were so rapid that she had knocked at the door, and Matilda had opened, before Nancy, who was standing behind, had got over her first breathless start of agitation and suspicion. She was standing, leaning forward a little, her hands clasped, her lips apart and panting with excitement, when the visitors saw her first. Lady Curtis was in a little glow of pleasure and interest.

"I had heard of Mrs. Arthur as a new neighbor," she said; "I hope I may come in and pay my respects, though it is getting late."

"Oh, come in, come in, my lady!" cried Matilda, officiously hastening to place chairs for the great ladies. Matilda's heart was not leaping so in her breast that she thought it must escape altogether—but Nancy's was, as she felt herself suddenly in the presence of these two ladies, with whom her own fate was so closely connected. She held her heart with her hand, that it might not leap out of her throat, and made a gasp for breath, and could say nothing; and it was no wonder if Lady Curtis was flattered by the impression made by her visit, and thought she had never seen so expressive a face before.

"My sister will be very pleased to make your ladyship's acquaintance," said Matilda. "What a fine day, and what a blessing after the wet! We were beginning to think it never would be fine again. Anna! don't you see my lady—and haven't you got a word to say?"

"It is very kind of Lady Curtis to come," said Nancy, with difficulty. She could not withdraw her eyes from the two. And Lucy looked at her from behind her mother with again a thrill of wonder and suspicion. Why was she so much agitated? What was there to be agitated about?

"I hope you like our village," said Lady Curtis. "Very few people see it, except the people of the place, so it is not admired so much as it ought to be, we think. It is a pretty village; but I trust you may not find it very dull as the winter goes on."

"Oh, we do not look for much; we are used to living very quietly—"

"That is well," said Lady Curtis; "for Oakley is very quiet—so quiet in winter that I much fear you will be frightened. Any stranger passing by is an event. To-day, for instance, it was quite gay—a pedler's cart, a most picturesque object; and when you two ladies appeared, whom I had not seen before, it became quite exciting. Hyde Park is seldom so full of novelty to me."

They both stared at her a little, not knowing what to say.

"*The cart looked quite cheerful*," said Matilda. "*I thought just like your* ladyship says. Some of the baskets were quite pretty, and it was nice to see it. But I could not persuade Na— my sister to buy any," she concluded, hurriedly. What a glance of fire shot at her from Nancy's eyes!

"We did not want them," she said, drawing a step nearer. She was too restless to sit down; her heart, indeed, beat more quietly, and her breathing was calmer; but to be here in the same room with them both, talking to them indifferently, as if she did not know them, as if she was not devoured with anxiety to conciliate them?—though a touch too much might have driven her, on the other side, to defy them openly. For the first time, Nancy felt how little she could depend on herself. They might say something, they might even look something, that would offend her, and send her off at a tangent. She felt no strength in her to guide herself. At present, even, while there was neither offence nor *rapprochement*, how wild and breathless she was, how incapable of managing the situation! It must depend altogether on what they would do or say.

"You have resources, I see," said Lady Curtis. "Books secure one against everything. But—" she added, shutting one hastily, which she had opened on the table. "This is not common reading. Is it a girl-graduate in her golden hair that we have got among us without knowing." She smiled graciously as she spoke. And Nancy grew red, and grew pale, and sat down, though only because her limbs trembled under her.

"I know—very little," she said, humbly, scarcely able to command her voice.

"But she is not a girl at all," said Matilda. "She is a married woman, though you would scarcely think it, my lady; and she is very fond of her book. Na— Anna, show her ladyship that beautiful drawing you are doing; that is what she thinks of most."

"The leaves? what a charming garland!" said Lady Curtis. The "rubbish" which Nancy had been amusing herself with was fixed up against the wall with two pins. Nancy herself thought it was rather pretty, but nothing, of course, to the *étude* in chalks.

"Oh no, not that! that is all nonsense; it isn't fit for your ladyship to look at: but look here, my lady," said Matilda, proudly. Lady Curtis cast a careless glance at the drawing which the sister thought so superior; then turned with much admiration to the wreath that hung against the wall.

"I must try to coax you," she said, "after a while, when you know us, to make some designs for me, for my crewels. How beautifully they would work! Look, Lucy."

"They are very clever," said Lucy, going up to look. The sisters could not believe their ears; and never, though Nancy had known the sweetness of girlish triumph, and had "had offers" before Arthur, and had tasted the sweetness of a young lover's adoration—never had gratified pride so touched her heart as at this moment. Her face brightened out of its anxious awe and alarm.

"Do you really, really think that? that I could make designs—for you?"

Lady Curtis thought she understood it all; evidently they were poor, and this promised perhaps some occupation that would help their poor

little ends to meet. "Indeed I do, really, really," she said, pleased with the simplicity of the words, "if you will be so very kind and take so much trouble. I will show you what I am working now when you come to see me at the Hall."

Nancy's head swam with a soft intoxication of pleasure. These kind looks, these kind words from this dreaded fine lady, who had been her bugbear—whom she hated in imagination, and credited with every evil quality—overwhelmed her. And Lucy's presence gave a thrill of danger, half-alarming, half-delicious, to this strange ecstasy of feeling. If Lucy should have recognized her! She was saying something, she could scarcely tell what, about nothing she could do being good enough, when Lady Curtis, still looking, smiling, in her face, prostrated her with the innocent question:

"You have met my son—in society—Mrs. Rolt thinks—"

Nancy started from her chair, unable to restrain herself. "Oh—no, no!" she said, trembling—not, she was going to say, in society, but changed this by instinct rather than reason, "not—your son; I told her after that it was—a mistake; only some one of the name."

"Ah!" said Lady Curtis, with a little sigh. "I am disappointed. I thought it had been my Arthur. Perhaps, then, it was one of my nephews, the general's boys? The rector is one of them. My son has not been at home for more than two years—it is a long time not to see him. I quite hoped," she added, with flattering friendliness, "that it had been him you knew."

Again Nancy's head went round and round. Should not she throw herself at this lady's feet, who smiled on her so graciously, and tell her all that Arthur was to her? The impulse was almost too strong to be resisted. While she stood on the eve of this rush, Lucy passing by to resume her seat after examining the drawing, gave her an inquiring, wondering, suspicious look. This brought Nancy down again to solid ground. She gave an alarmed, confused glance round, not daring to trust herself to speak.

"I am sure my sister would be glad if you would have the picture, my lady," said Matilda, "since you like it—though I'm sure I can't think why. It's all leaves that we got out of your park. Me and—Anna often walked there. It's a little wet at this time of the year; but it must be lovely in the summer—if we stay till then."

"I hope you will stay," said Lady Curtis, rising; "you ought to see Oakley in full beauty; and I hope you will come and see Lucy and me," she added, holding out her hand. Nancy did not know what was happening to her when that soft hand pressed hers. "And if we can be of any use to you—as you are here alone—I hope you will tell me," Lady Curtis said.

"Well!" said Matilda, when the door closed upon them, and she had watched their figures from the window. "Well, Nancy! what do you think of her now? A nicer lady, more civil, more pleasant, more friendly, I never wish to see; and that was what you made such a fuss about, as if she was a monster and would eat you! I'd go down on my bended knees to Providence to give me a mother-in-law like that. Not a bit of pride—as if we had been the best ladies in the land. Oh, Nancy, Nancy! what a fool you have been! If poor dear mother only knew!"

But Nancy was past standing up for herself, or making any reply. She had covered her face with her hands; her whole frame was tingling, her head swimming, her heart full of trouble and pleasure, and confusion and despair. What a fool, what a fool she had been! That, indeed, if nothing else, was beyond measure true.

As for Lady Curtis, she was enchanted with her new acquaintance. "There is some mystery there," she said, as they walked briskly away. "It is easy to see that the sister is of a very different class and breeding from that touching young creature with her blue eyes. Is she a sister at all, I wonder, or some old servant for a protection to her? I don't know when I have been so much interested," she said.

As for Lucy, she said nothing; her mind was full of doubt and confusion. She did not know what to think, and there was nothing that she could trust herself to say.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

Durant had not been at Oakley for more than a year. No invitation had come to him, though he still corresponded with Lady Curtis on the same confidential and affectionate terms as before; and his heart had grown sick with this pause of stagnation in his life. There are moments when that which we have borne with tolerable calm for years becomes all at once intolerable to us; and this is especially the case with men who, having labored hard and dutifully without much personal recompense, are suddenly moved by some accidental prick to see that their best years are floating away from them without any of the delights that belong to that crown of existence.

Why this feeling should have come upon Durant after his late visit to Underhayes, and not on previous visits, when he had seen his friend Arthur, so much younger than himself, enjoying the happiness which it was not given to him to enjoy, it would be difficult to tell. Perhaps Arthur's happiness, while it lasted, was too full of drawbacks to attract his friend, to whom it never could have been possible to woo his love in Mrs. Bates's parlor, behind the backs of the family. But, curiously enough, when the family was swept away, and all its shabbiness had become pathetic; and when Arthur's happiness had fallen into dust, and become apparently a thing beyond restoration or even hope—then, and only then, did it stimulate the dormant passion in Durant's veins. He said to himself that to lose the chance of happiness altogether by thus passively waiting till it should drop upon him from the clouds was, perhaps, in the end a greater foolishness than even the mad folly which had ruined Arthur. Arthur, at all events, at the worst, had had his chance; whereas Lewis, so far as appearances went, was never to have his chance, but only toil and toil on for the benefit of others till the capacity for joy was exhausted in him. In the gray autumnal weather, when the rains are falling, and the skies lowering, and all things settling down to "the dead of the year," does not sometimes a longing, insupportable, for sun-

shine and brightness, cross us—a longing which has to be satisfied by some lighting-up of lamps and artificial processes of illumination, if not by the natural and blessed sun?

Durant went on for a little, with his heart full of smouldering fire, reflecting upon his own loneliness amidst all the enjoyments and fellowships of the world; reflecting upon the manner in which his own hard earnings melted away, running into the bottomless pit of improvidence and unlovely waste in his father's house, with no real benefit even to the dwellers therein, much less to him whose labors had no lightening, whatever happened. At last the point of explosion was reached by the touch of a piece of good fortune. For the first time he was retained as first counsel in an important case likely to attract some notice in the world, and at the same time was appointed one of a commission of investigation into certain legal evils then under the consideration of Parliament.

The sudden pleasure of distinction among his peers, altogether apart from the profit of it, conveyed a swift and penetrating pleasure to his mind, and altogether overset the impatient patience which so many thoughts had already put in jeopardy. A little success often, in such circumstances, fires the mine which weariness and reflection and comparison have been filling with combustibles. Why should he drag on any longer dully, without even an attempt to brighten his own life? The man who blacked his shoes, secure of weekly remuneration, had just "thrown up his place," and risked his existence, in order to "better himself;" and why should not the master try to better himself too? This sudden impulse set him all on fire. What was the use of his self-denial, his renunciation of all pleasant things? They who would have them must seize them, without all this reckoning of possibilities and counting of cost.

Durant was not superior to that almost fierce independence which, like all good that comes out of evil, has its false side. The dependence and incessant demands of his family had made him stern in his resolution to owe no man anything, to struggle out his own career unaided; and had also made him too proud to ask any favor in his own person, even a night's lodging, from the friends whom he had served with all the humbleness of true generosity when occasion offered. He would have spent time, which was more valuable to him than money is to most people, or money, of which he did not possess too large a stock, in the service of the Curtises, whenever they called upon him; but he would not ask them to invite him, or even suggest that he would like to be invited. This was one of the *défauts de ses qualités*. So it took him a little trouble to get himself to Oakley in a roundabout way. He did this by means of a college friend, who had a living within a dozen miles, and to whom he had no objection to offer himself for a short visit; and being there, what so natural as that he should drive over to Oakley for a few hours? He did this a few days after the visit of Lady Curtis to Nancy, and appeared suddenly in the morning, conscious and anxious, while the family were still at breakfast.

"I thought I'd run down and see Cavendish at Stainforth," he said, feeling the weakness of *the excuse.*

"Cavendish at Stainforth!" Lady Curtis echoed, turning pale. She saw through the pretence, but she did not see through the cause of it. If it was her son who immediately occurred to her mind, what mother will blame her? She ignored all motives of his own on Durant's part with pitiless though unconscious cruelty; and left the table precipitately, her heart beating with sudden agitation. "Oh, Lewis, something has happened to Arthur, and you have come to break it to me!" she said, turning round upon him as he followed her into her morning-room.

"No," he said, with a sheepish air of guilt, feeling himself absolutely wicked to have thus frightened her for ends of his own.

Lucy had lingered behind, and was following him when she heard this reply. She turned at once and went away. Her heart had beaten even more wildly than her mother's at sight of him, but with less simplicity of feeling. Was it just that Arthur should always be the first thought? If it was not something which had happened to Arthur that brought Lewis here, then it was—something else. This conclusion, so very simple when put into these words, filled Lucy with involuntary excitement. When he said "No" to her mother's question, she turned and went away. Was he going to risk it, then—to dare all the dangers of absolute separation? Lucy had not seen him for more than a year; but she knew what was in his heart. She had never doubted him; she had been faithful herself to the undisclosed hope, and so had he. She hurried away to her own room, while he, she knew it, went to try their fortune, to put it to the test, to lose or gain everything. Lucy's heart beat so that she could not think. And would they be so hard, so cruel, as to deny her her happiness, the father and mother who loved her so dearly? Most probably they would do so. She could not deceive herself. Most likely he would be sent away without hope, perhaps with disdain.

A girl has a terrible moment to go through when she knows that her life, and the life of another still more dear to her, are thus being decided for her without any power of hers to interfere. If Lewis asked her for her love, she would tell him yes, she would give it, she had given it; but herself she could not give. She was free, you may say, of age, fully capable of choosing, and with no law, human or divine, to prevent her from settling what was more important to her than to any one — her own course and her own companion in life. All so true, yet so futile in its truth. Lucy was free: yet tied hand and foot, bound by innumerable gossamer-threads of duty and affection, which she could not, and would not, if she could, attempt to break. It was no law nor enacted disability, nothing that Parliament could touch, nor public opinion, nor emancipation of women; but nature, unrepealable, unchangeable, that bound her. She could not go to her usual occupations, she could not go down-stairs. She sat trembling, scarcely able to think for the sound in her ears of commotion within her. She had to sit and wait while he made his venture; she knew there was nothing, for the moment, in her power.

"Not Arthur!" cried Lady Curtis. "Oh, forgive me, Lewis, that I always think of my own boy first. You are sure there is nothing

that you want to tell me gently—I know your kind heart—not to frighten me?"

"I want to tell you something—about myself, Lady Curtis."

"Ah!" she cried, in a tone of relief; and then with a perceptible ease and calm of indifference, "about yourself? I hope it is something very good, very delightful, something equal to your deserts. There is nothing I could be so happy to hear."

"Something of that, to begin with," he said, and told her of the advantages that had come to him; his appointment on the Commission, and his first important brief. Lady Curtis was delighted, as she had promised to be. She threw herself into the discussion of his prospects with enthusiasm.

"I am as glad as I could be of anything, except good fortune to Arthur," she said. "My dear Lewis, you who have been so good to us all! you come next. And now all the world is before you, and everything that is good. Thank God for it! though I never had any doubt on the subject," she said, smiling at him through tears of pleasure, as she held both his hands.

How cheering this was! Sympathy could not be more warm, more cordial, more affectionate. It warmed his heart, and brought the tears to his own eyes.

"Yes," he said, "it is the beginning, I believe, and hope— It is the opening of the door. My career ought to be clear now, if I have courage and heart to go on."

"You, courage and heart!" she said; "of course you will have both, Lewis. You are not the kind of man that fails. I never for a moment expected anything else. It is not always, to be sure, that men get what they deserve; but you—you are not of the mettle which fails."

"But supposing that, and that I succeed, what is it to lead to, Lady Curtis?" he asked, half mournfully; for it was evident to him that, as yet, she had not even the least glimmer of imagination as to what he was going to ask.

"Lead to?" she said; "the Bench, of course, and perhaps the wool-sack. You speak so little of yourself that I scarcely know which way your ambitions lie, Lewis, whether you care for politics at all; of course, that is the finer career of the two—if you take to it."

"That is all you give me, then," he said, "my choice of two dignities? I do not say they are not both great objects of ambition; but is there nothing sweeter, nothing dearer to come, my lady? You are very kind to me—kinder than I had any right to expect; but have you nothing more to wish me in your kind heart than the wool-sack and the Bench?"

She looked at him, faltering a little. She began now to see what he meant.

"What can I say more?" she said; "yes, everything, Lewis. I wish you all—you can desire."

"The desire of my heart," he said, getting up from his seat in his agitation; "that is the wish in the Psalms, and there is none that goes so far, or is so sweet. My lady, you have known me almost ever since I was fit to form a wish. Don't you know what it is—the desire of my heart?"

"Lewis—Lewis!" she cried, hastily; then stopped. Had she been about to warn him to say no more, to stop him in the revelation of his wishes? But if so, she changed her mind, and looked at him eagerly, alarmed, and wringing her hands.

"You know what it is," he said, with a smile, turning to her. "I don't need to say it, do I? If I cannot have Lucy, what is everything else worth to me? I know I am not her equal in birth, if you still think that matters beyond everything else. But does it, does it? No one else can have thought of her so long and constantly as I have done. I know all her tastes, her ways. What she likes, I like—and her brother, you know, Lady Curtis—has been all I have known for a brother."

"I know, I know," she said, and the tears in her eyes were not now tears of pleasure. She shook her head while she looked at him with motherly tenderness, through her wet eyelashes. "And you have been the best brother to him, the kindest!" she cried. "Alas!" But with all, she shook her head.

"I did not mean to set up any claim on that score," he said, quickly; "but because there has been this constant affection between us, and I have never thought of any other woman. All the rest of the world has been naught to me by the side of Lucy. I have thought of no one but her. And is this all nothing, my lady, worse than nothing, because my grandfather was a tradesman? It seems hard, don't you think it is hard, difficult to bear?"

"Lewis, you know it is not so everywhere," she cried. "There are gentlemen in England—the best in the land, who would give their daughter to you, Lewis Durant, good as you are known to be, the truest gentleman, and rejoice in her happiness!" She paused, and her voice fell, and once more she shook her head. "But Sir John—"

"If I have your help, my lady, I will not be afraid of Sir John," he said: "he is not like you; but he is good to the bottom of his heart, good all through and through."

"Lewis!" cried my lady, with sudden emotion, "do you want me to be in love with you as well as Lucy? So he is, my dear boy; so he is, my dear, prejudiced, narrow-minded old man! he does not understand always—but he is good, as you say, all good, and no guile in him. But what has that to do with it, after all, my poor boy?" she added, dropping from her enthusiasm, and shaking her head once more. "He is fond of you, too, and that does not matter either. You will never get him to see it, never! I know him better than you do."

"If you will be on my side, he will come to see it," said Durant. She made him no direct reply, but hurried on.

"And all the more since we have had this disappointment with Arthur. If Arthur had married happily as we liked—as young Seymour has done—things might have been different. But now that Arthur has made such shipwreck, Lucy is all that is left to us. He will not let her speak to any one whom he thinks inferior to her. He has almost shut the house even to his nephew Bertie; he would prefer even that she did not marry at all."

"All this will not alarm me," he said, keeping his eyes upon her, "if you are on my side."

"Think!" she said, not paying any attention,

"think how bad it is for us in the county. Arthur thrown away upon a—worse than nobody: a foolish girl who has not even the wit to hold by him and make him happy—our only son! and Lucy, our only daughter, if she too were to—"

"Marry a nobody!" he said, with a smile, which he could not divest of some bitterness. "Ah! Lady Curtis, that was what I feared—you are not on my side."

"Lewis, only think!" she said; "put yourself in my place! I have been so proud of my children; perhaps it was foolish—Heaven knows one always suffers for it—but if neither of them—neither of them! is to—have any *succès* in marriage, make any brilliant connection. Yes, yes," she said, "it is contemptible; I know it; you have a right to scorn me; but, Lewis, put yourself in my place."

"I do," he said; "and if I could, I would grudge Lucy to a nobody as much as you do; but is all my happiness to go for that, my lady? I dare not speak of hers," he said, faltering, "if I could hope that her happiness was concerned, what secondary consideration in the world could be put by the side of that?"

Lady Curtis shook her head. She clasped and unclasped her hands, with the nervousness of agitation.

"It is easy for you to say that," she cried, "very easy for you at your stage; but happiness is not everything—happiness is not all I have to look to;" and as she spoke, there flashed across Lady Curtis's mind a realization of the time when she should hear her daughter called Mrs. Durant, and listen to the anxious explanations of society as to how old Durant, the saddler, was not her father, but her grandfather-in-law. How could she bear it, how could she bear it? she who had in imagination seen her pretty daughter the admired of all admirers, at the height of splendor and fashion, and with a better title than her mother's. No, no, no; it was not to be tolerated. She could never permit it, whatever traitors might fight in her bosom for Lewis and his rights.

"This is how it is, then," he said, sadly, "it is you, my friend, my kindest patroness and guide—you who have been the help to me that only such as you could be—that reject me, my lady? Why should I claim you as *my* lady—or use such a familiar term at all?"

"Lewis, don't be cruel to me!" she cried.

"I am not cruel. It is only that it is you, and not Sir John, who rejects me," he said.

No intimation was made to Lucy how this interview was going on. She did not know what form it would take, nor how far Durant would go; and after the first half-hour of suppressed excitement and agitation, her pride arose against the notion of waiting here for any news that might be sent her. She would not do it. She went out, rushing along round by the back of the house to avoid being seen from her mother's windows, and set off to visit a sick family in the Park, belonging to one of the game-keepers. This would occupy her, and prevent her mind from dwelling upon anything Lewis might have to say to Lady Curtis, and anything my lady might reply. But it may be imagined how busy her mind was with a thousand thoughts, as she *struck across the damp Park*, upon which the hoar-frost had melted not very long before. It made her wet, but she did not care.

She did not come back—and this was done with intention—till the bell was ringing for luncheon. She saw her mother and Durant both looking anxiously down the avenue as she made her way in by the back entrance as she had gone out. "My lady wants you, Miss Lucy," all the maids told her one after another; but Lucy's pride was not to be so easily overcome. She went up-stairs and took off her wet shoes and out-door wraps with the composure of a Stoic, going down only when the summons of the bell was no longer to be neglected, for Sir John was not a man to be kept waiting.

When she got down-stairs, her color a little brighter than usual, and her air perhaps conscious in the very elaboration of indifference—she found the party already assembled, her father from his library, and her mother from the morning-room, where she had been shut up the whole morning with her guest. These two gave her anxious glances, both the one and the other. Some understanding, she felt sure, they must have come to, as, mastering her pride and the sense of injury she felt in being thus unacquainted with what had been going on, she sat down at the table. Why did not she know? why was not she the first person to be considered? To be sure, it was her own fault. She had gone away, concealing herself from them, binding on her armor of pride, pretending not to know or care. But it was curious even to Lucy in that condition, and would have been still more curious to a calmer spectator, to see Sir John taking his place in unbroken calm amidst a party so agitated.

Sir John knew nothing of what had been going on—of Durant's presumptuous hopes, nor of how he had been occupied winning over Lady Curtis to his side. He was full of something which had happened to himself, a little adventure which had quite roused him from his habitual calm. He told them all the story as they sat at the meal, which was little more than a pretence to the others. While he ate his cutlet he went on with his tale, telling them how he had driven out to see the state of the plantations of which Rolt had been talking, and how, as they approached one special spot, he sent the groom away to inquire into some changes in the covers which he had not authorized.

"And when I got as far as Fox's Hollow," said Sir John, "I found the gate shut, which Short had assured me was always open. I was driving the black colt, Lucy; you know the animal is a restive creature and very fresh. I don't know when he had been in harness before. I remember the time when it would not have cost me much to jump down and open the gate, too quick to give any horse his head; but that is all over now. I was reflecting what to do with such a high-tempered brute, and a little doubtful whether I'd venture to get down—a slow business now, Durant, as you'll know when you have come to my years; and as I was thinking that discretion was the better part of valor, who should rise up suddenly from the bushes but—no, not a pheasant, not a covey—but a beautiful young lady! You may well open your eyes—a young creature like a princess in a strange sort of black dress. I never saw her before. She opened the gate to me, and she made me a

courtesy and gave me a smile. I can tell you, my lady, it produced such a sensation in me as I have not felt for long enough. Of course I thanked her—of course I said everything in the way of gratitude, and regret to have troubled her, and excuse of myself as an old man. But the wonder is, I didn't know her! A perfectly charming creature! Could it be young Seymour's wife, or who could it be? Upon my honor, though it sounds so strange to say so, I never saw her before!"

"Then *you* have seen her too?" cried Lady Curtis. "Now, Lucy, you perceive your papa agrees with me—"

"Who is this mysterious princess?" said Durant. He was glad, as was my lady, of something that relieved the painful agitation of preoccupied thoughts.

"I don't know who she is, but she is a very charming person," said Sir John, helping himself to another cutlet. "One would think you had all lunched in secret while I have been having my adventure. Durant, you don't eat anything. If it had been you who had seen this vision, we should have drawn our own conclusions; but it has not taken away my appetite," the old man said, with a smile. "If it was young Seymour's wife, young Seymour is a lucky fellow. I can't think otherwise who she could be."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

Nancy was not less moved by the morning's adventure than Sir John had been. She had strayed much farther than usual, taking her walk alone in the Park while Matilda was busy with her outfit. The gate was close to a bit of wood where the trees were painted in all their most gorgeous autumn tints; and since Lady Curtis had admired her simple garland of leaves, her enthusiasm for them had increased. She had come out here in perfect good faith to find others which she could copy, which might please the lady who had been so kind, and whom—though only herself knew this—it was so important to please.

The morning was fine, though the grass was wet, and Nancy, tired with her walk, was sitting resting on a fallen tree. Her heart had given a little jump when she saw Sir John driving along towards her. It was all he could do to manage the high-spirited young horse. She knew him well enough by sight, and she had no fear of him such as she had felt of the ladies; her secret was safe from him. It did not even occur to her, as it might have done, that to conciliate Arthur's father would be something in her favor, so that everything occurred naturally, without motive or artificial stimulus. It was, indeed, the most natural impulse which moved her to get up hastily as soon as she saw his doubtful glance at the gate, and open it. In all probability she would not have budged for Lady Curtis. The suspicion and terror in her heart would have represented to her that the readiness to do such an office might be misconstrued; but she obeyed her impulse in respect to Sir John with the most spontaneous readiness. It was agreeable to her to do him the kindly service which it always becomes the young to render to the old.

She looked up and smiled at him, and said, "You are very welcome," as he exhausted himself in thanks. And it did not make Nancy's look less gracious or less fair, that she saw the old gentleman's admiring wonder, his evident anxiety to make out who she was. At Sir John's age a man need not hide his fatherly admiration for a lovely face. He looked at her with his white head uncovered, with pleasure and kindness and surprise in his eyes, and lavished thanks and excuses.

"I am glad I was here to do it," Nancy said, feeling that corresponding sentiment of kindness in herself which is the soul of good manners. He thought she was as gracious, as polished, and graceful as she was handsome; and a sense of gratification that warmed her heart and softened it came over her. Arthur's father! She had not heard half so much of him as of my Lady and Lucy. She was not afraid of him, and to serve him gave her a sensation of innocent and real pleasure, which made Nancy feel affectionate to the old man. He looked back at her as he drove away, waving his hand and smiling; and she looked after him with friendly eyes. They were friends from that moment. Lady Curtis's kindness had half broken her heart; but the encounter with Sir John made Nancy happy, made her feel herself approved, flattered, raised in her own opinion. And when a great many things have happened to lower one in one's own opinion, could anything be more grateful than this? She walked home exhilarated in mind and body, no longer languid or tired, and surprised Matilda by the news that she had met Sir John, and made acquaintance with him. "I think he is the nicest of all," said Nancy; "old gentlemen are so kind; they do not frighten you like ladies."

"Oh, frighten you!" cried Matilda; "how could her ladyship frighten you—the kindest lady! but that your evil conscience must be always saying, What would she say if she knew? Are you going to waste your time with that rubbish again, Nancy, littering all the floor? Why can't you go on with your beautiful drawing? that was worth while; I thought of getting a frame for it as soon as it was done."

"You can frame the original; it must be better than my copy," said Nancy, arranging her leaves. Matilda looked at her with an impatience scarcely to be restrained; but she remembered that her ladyship had taken notice of the rubbish, and shrugged her shoulders over the strange fancies of the gentlefolks. Nancy was just the same as they were. She might have been born in that rank of life herself, she took such fancies. Matilda was thankful, as she went on with her hemming, that no such nonsense had ever occupied *her*. But to know all the details of the interview pleased her much, and she would have sat all day long stitching and listening, had not her sister commanded her, later in the afternoon, to get her hat and come out to see the sunset.

"Oh, the sunset! A great deal of good that will do me, and not half my chemises done yet," Matilda murmured to herself; but she obeyed Nancy, who indeed did not like to be disobeyed. They took the usual walk down through the village to the Hall gates, and by the stile on the left hand—the same stile over which they had come the first day they met Lucy. Since then there

had always been the excitement of some possible encounter to anticipate, and as this idea occurred to her, Matilda's bosom swelled with natural exultation to think how entirely they had got into high life. Sir John and her ladyship had become, as it were, their daily bread. If dear father had but known!

A sunset is a fine thing, no doubt; but, if you think of it, after all, it is not much of a sight—a thing that happens almost every day, and costs nobody a penny; a thing that the very poorest tramp may enjoy as well as you. To think how many people there are that will gaze and gaze at such a thing, and look as if they never could have enough of it! Matilda was more clever; she saw it at a glance, and did not require to look again; and, indeed, it was very hard not to believe that it was affectation on Nancy's part to look at it so long. Matilda looked round her. There was not much to see; but it is astonishing how much you can see when your wits are about you.

The spot where Nancy and her sister were standing was quite near the avenue; and as Matilda, with her mind and eyes unoccupied, looked out for something to amuse her, she suddenly was aware of two people walking up and down in what might be called the side aisle of the avenue, under the shadow of the trees, which still were rich in autumn foliage. This "took her attention" immediately; for who could it be but a pair of lovers, wandering up and down in intimate intercourse. And what is there in heaven or earth more attractive to a young woman than a pair of lovers? This sight waked Matilda out of the indifference into which the sunset had thrown her. She peered through the bushes with the liveliest interest and sympathy, not wishing to act the part of eavesdropper—and, indeed, she was too far off for that—but with the most purely benevolent regard, doing as she would be done by. Had any disagreeable interruption of the interview threatened, Matilda would have been but too glad to act as scout and give the alarm; and soon a fact became apparent which added immensely to her interest, and, indeed, turned it into excitement: she perceived that the lady was no other than Miss Curtis. Here was a startling discovery! She made herself a little peep-hole through the branches of a gnarled hawthorn, that pricked her fingers as she separated the twigs. Who was the gentleman? Matilda thought his aspect was strangely familiar. It was not the rector, who was said in the village to be going to marry Miss Lucy. Who was it? Matilda gazed long, and then she gave a start which nearly upset her into the midst of all the prickles of the thorn. This was, indeed, something more interesting than such a cheap exhibition as a sunset. After a moment she came and plucked at her sister's arm.

"Nancy, Nancy, look here! I want you to look at something."

"What is it?" said Nancy, languidly.

She was sitting on the bank, though it was damp, with her hands folded in her lap, and her face all illuminated with the golden light which dropped lower and lower every moment. It had filled Nancy's soul with thoughts. She was wondering what was to come of all this, half hopefully, half drearily; wondering if Arthur and she *were to meet again—if they* would ever live together again—if her life was to change into such a beautiful life as they lived, those people in the great house; or if it was to be spent dully in the cottage, obscure and hidden from all eyes. The sunset filled her eyes and glittered in the dew that filled them, and insensibly as that dew rose, the thoughts welled up into her heart.

"Nancy, Nancy!" said Matilda, "oh, look here—oh, please come and look here! It's her, as clear as daylight; and I do think it's *him*."

"Him!" Nancy began to tremble, and rose, but did not advance farther. "What are you saying—who do you mean by 'him?'"

"Will you come here and look?" cried Matilda. "Come! I tell you, it's Miss Lucy, as sure as this is me, with her young man."

"How dare you speak so," cried Nancy, flushing crimson, "of any of them?"

To talk of Lucy's young man seemed to her something like blasphemy. Naturally, she was becoming a purist about language, as she learned what nicety of speech meant. She was a great deal more shocked than Lucy would have been.

"Well," said Matilda, stoutly, "he *is* her young man. What is wrong in that? They've been going up and down like two young people keeping company this hour or more, while you have been watching the sky (of course she exaggerated the time), and nothing a bit wrong in it, that I can see. You've done the same yourself—and so would I if it had come in my way," said honest Matilda. Then, however, her voice sunk, and she took her sister by the arm. "That's not half," she said, "Nancy, dear! and the most important's to come. Do you remember Durant, that came to Underhayes with Arthur? You must remember Durant—him that Sarah Jane took such a fancy to."

"I remember Mr. Durant," said fastidious Nancy. "I don't know why *you* should talk of him so familiarly."

"Oh, have done with your fine talk and your nonsense!" cried Matilda. "Look here, he's *there*, Nancy! I tell you he's there, close by, courting Miss Lucy. You can come and look for yourself, if you don't trust me."

Nancy came slowly, half forced by the eager Matilda, but already turning over in her mind what expedients would be necessary to escape this sudden turn of affairs. Durant! (She allowed herself to drop the Mr. in her thoughts.) He would find her out, she knew, before many hours were over. She could not keep her secret from him; he would find her, and write to Arthur, and make or mar everything. What was she to do? A great conflict arose within her. She was sick enough of this state of affairs, and if Durant did intervene to end it, would there be so very much to regret? Arthur would come home, he would come to her, and there would be a reconciliation, and all would be well. But then, on the other hand, she had to own, with a sickening sensation in her heart, that already Arthur must have been for some time aware of "what had happened," and he had not hastened home to her. And the idea that Durant might write to him, send for him as a matter of duty, sent all the blood coursing through her veins. Never! never! She would die first! Even short of that, how much pleasanter it would be to manage everything herself, to leave it to Providence, than that, anyhow, Durant should step

in. All these thoughts rushed in a heap into her mind, tumultuous, rolling and rushing over each other like clouds before the wind, as she took the half-dozen steps necessary to bring her to Matilda's point of vision to verify what Matilda had seen. But it did not require any verification to Nancy. She had felt sure it was true from the first moment. It was exactly the thing that was most likely to happen. She looked through the thorn branches, however, with a wakening of sympathy, such as she had scarcely yet felt, in Lucy.

Lucy of late had been lost in Sir John and her ladyship; and when she had thought of her specially, it was with jealous fear rather than sympathy. Now she watched her with a curious mingling of interest and opposition. It seemed wrong to Nancy that Miss Curtis should be here with a young man without the knowledge of her father and mother; and Durant—Durant, who had his living to make, like any common man! She remembered very well what Arthur had told her about him. He, it was clear, could be no match for Lucy; it was not right, it was not *nice* of Lucy. The forehead of Mrs. Arthur contracted. She did not like any coming down in the family with which she was connected. She liked to think of them all as very great people indeed, quite above that necessity of working for a living which brought down Durant to the ordinary level of man. All this, however, was by the way; and the immediate thing she had to consider was what she herself would do in this new emergency. She ended hastily at last, when the pair of lovers (since they could be nothing else) turned their faces towards the Hall. Nancy seized her sister's arm, and without saying anything rushed hastily towards the stile. They got over it, and out of the gates, while still the backs of the others were turned; and then for the moment the two young women ventured to take breath and feel themselves safe.

"They were going up towards the house," said Nancy; "we have no need to hurry." But she gave looks of alarm behind her, and walked rapidly back to the cottage. As ill luck would have it, they met the rector, who stopped, as he always did, and kept them talking. When he had insisted on planting himself in their path for a full minute, Nancy got desperate. He was to be got rid of, she felt, at all hazards.

"We met Miss Curtis in the avenue just now," she said. "She had a gentleman with her. Do you know if there is a gentleman of the name of Durant, or something like that, visiting at the Hall?"

"Oh, Durant is there, is he?" said the rector, with a look of annoyance. "Yes, I know him. He used to be very intimate there; but I had hoped he had not been so much in favor of late. I say frankly, 'I hope,' for I am not fond of him. He is a nobody, a—perhaps you have met him, Mrs. Arthur. He has got into very good society, somehow or other; but he is nobody."

"I think I have seen him somewhere; but you will find him now in the avenue with Miss Curtis; and we must hurry back," she said, nodding and smiling as she went on. She liked Durant a great deal better than she liked Bertie; but to escape from her present dilemma was more important than either. "Now, Matilda, make haste; let us *get home*," she said. She had sent the rector "after them," not without a certain malicious pleasure. She had freed herself from the immediate danger in which she lay. He would talk, and they would be obliged to listen, as, otherwise, Nancy would have been; and with another anxious look behind, she sped along the road. But it was an unlucky day. In the village street they met Mrs. Rolt, who also had a thousand things to say. She rushed across the street with a budget full of news, and laughed and joked, and congratulated the young stranger on having made such an impression upon Sir John. Mrs. Rolt told Nancy that she had been at the Hall immediately after luncheon, and that Sir John would talk of nothing else.

"And he is a very good friend—a faithful friend—though he is not very demonstrative," said Cousin Julia; "but, indeed, my dear, he was quite demonstrative about you, and talked of you all the time. Mr. Durant was there," she added, confidentially, "and I don't think he much wanted Mr. Durant. You know there was always a kindness between him and Lucy; but it would be quite out of the question for Lucy, quite out of the question, especially since her brother's unfortunate marriage."

"What has her brother's marriage got to do with it?" cried Nancy, forgetting, in this unexpected attack, even her fears.

"Oh, my dear, don't you know what a dreadful thing it is for the family? It has spoiled Arthur's life, poor fellow! Where are the heirs to come from?" Cousin Julia cried, pathetically. "However bad she might be, it would not be quite so bad, you know, if there were any heirs; but the succession, my dear! Lucy must marry, and she must marry well, or what is to become of the family?" Mrs. Rolt said, with decision. "She, too, will have to suffer for her brother. The innocent are always involved with the guilty; and when once a wrong thing has been done, one never knows where it may end."

Nancy had grown crimson with shame and resentment—and with pain too, pain that she could not fathom in all its complexities. She turned away coldly from Mrs. Rolt, scarcely attempting to separate from her with the pretence at civility which good manners (she felt) demanded. The innocent involved with the guilty! how dared any one so speak of her? She went on to her cottage, forgetting her previous alarms, holding her head high, and she did not take any notice of the sound of wheels behind her, the rapid dash of a dog-cart which came whirling along and round the corner from the Hall. But she came to herself with a start and cry, when, turning round suddenly, she met Durant's look, which flashed from the ordinary calm of an indifferent passer-by into profound surprise and instant eagerness at sight of her. The dog-cart was going so fast, with so much "way" upon it, that it was a minute before it could be drawn up and he could spring down from it. In that minute, Nancy, aroused to the necessity of the case, had darted down a little side alley, by which she knew she could reach the back-door of the cottage. Fortunately there was nobody about to see her fly along past the little gardens to the open kitchen door. She darted in, to the alarm of Fanny, and, flying breathless up-stairs, rushed to the shelter of her own room.

"If any one calls, I am ill in bed," she cried, as she passed, to the consternation of the little maid. Matilda by this time was quietly seated in the little sitting-room at work. "Come up with me! come up with me! Durant is after me!" cried Nancy, breathless. Matilda had presence of mind to obey without a word, though she made a mental memorandum as she went upstairs after her sister. "She says Durant, too," Matilda said to herself, but she made no audible protest; and from a corner between the curtains she watched and reported how the dog-cart waited, and how long a time it was before the visitor came back baffled, after following down the alley and finding nothing.

"He is looking very suspicious-like at all the houses," said Matilda.

"Oh, keep close! keep close!" cried Nancy, from the bed on which she was crouching, as if he could see in through the curtains. They spent an anxious half-hour watching his proceedings, for the dog-cart drove away and then came back, and their fears were renewed for another tremulous moment. But Durant, fortunately, did not apply to any one who could give him information. He trusted apparently to his own sharp-sightedness, or to the hope that Nancy had hidden herself, and would reappear again. The sisters did not venture to draw breath until it was clear that he was gone.

Here was another and important embarrassment and difficulty in their way. They did not know that Durant's day's occupation had been so very important to himself as to eclipse all other interests. They thought he would come back next day to search thoroughly, and make sure that they did not escape him. For to Nancy, in the present crisis, it was evident that nothing else could be half so important; her own affairs naturally appeared to her the most likely subject to absorb Durant's thoughts.

CHAPTER XL.

THE explanation between Durant and Lucy, of which Nancy had been, so to speak, a spectator, and which had filled her with such doubtful feelings before the moment when she apprehended peril to herself, had taken place under difficulties. It was only when driven up into a corner by his repeated appeals that Lady Curtis had given a doubtful and reluctant assent—it did not deserve so cordial a title as consent—to his petition, which was only that he might be allowed to refer the question to Lucy herself. "If she says no, there will not be another word to say," he had represented. Lady Curtis had only replied by shaking her head, a gesture which filled him with exhilaration, though, after all, it might have meant something different from the conclusion he drew from it. But after the confused meal, which he was so anxious to get over and so impatient of, it was some time before Lucy's attention could be secured. She was coy and unwilling, and half angry, he thought; while her mother, though so affectionate to himself, would have been glad enough to stave off the interview which she had reluctantly promised might take place between them. She would not go back from her word; but if she could manage to get it postponed, deferred till the last moment, Lady Curtis would have felt that something was gained. And things seemed to fall out in harmony with her purpose as the afternoon went on.

Sir John took possession of Durant, in the first place, to show him something; and then Lady Curtis managed to keep by Lucy's side, hoping that the time at which he had settled to leave them would have come too near for any explanation before the opportunity came. But Durant was not the kind of man to be so baffled by circumstances. When he saw the policy she was pursuing (and which, with an hypocrisy which half maddened, half amused, half touched him, she seemed to confess and beg pardon for, with deprecating, beseeching looks), he broke openly through the maze she was entangling his feet in. He went up to Lucy boldly as she sat by her mother's side.

"There is something that I want to say to you," he said, with a tremulousness very unlike his usual steady tones. "Your mother has permitted me to ask you—to hear me—"

"Do not say that, Lewis! do not say that!" cried Lady Curtis. "I could not forbid it—that was all."

"It comes to the same thing. Will you hear what I have to say—will you listen to me? It may be nothing to you, but it is everything in the world to me!"

Lucy grew crimson red, then pale, then red again. "Can you say it here?" she asked, in a scarcely audible voice.

"Anywhere, wherever you will, no place can change what I have to say; but rather alone," he cried, growing so agitated that his words were half inarticulate too. Lady Curtis got up, with a sigh, to leave them. But Lucy felt the atmosphere of the room, the sense of constraint in the very air, stifle her. She sprung up hurriedly. "Stay here, mamma; I will go out with Lewis," she said, scarcely knowing what she said. It was quite unawares that this unconscious familiar utterance of his name anticipated everything more she could say on her side, as his appeal had forestalled everything on his. She caught up her hat and shawl as she went out, then turned to him with a question in her eyes—was it a question? She knew as well as he did, and he knew as well as she did. Had it not all been settled years ago?

Lady Curtis was very restless when she was thus left behind. She had given her unwilling assent only on hard conditions—that nothing more than this one interview should at present pass between the lovers—that no formal engagement should be made or correspondence begun, and nothing as yet be said to Sir John. She was to "manage" him as best she could, taking her opportunity; nothing was to be hurried or forced. They were to wait the next change in the drama of Arthur's fortunes. If anything happened in that, Sir John might be more easy to manage. But though she set up all these imaginary defences round her, Lady Curtis knew very well that in ceding one point she had virtually ceded all. How keep two persons who understood each other, who were faithful to each other, who could neither be coerced nor frightened, apart? The thing was impossible. It might be done for a time, making everybody uncomfortable, but the means of permanently afflicting Lucy, whom her

parents loved, who was more precious to them than all the rest of the world—this was folly, she knew. Sir John might resist, and he would regret; but yield he must, if they insisted. And what could Lucy do else?

Lady Curtis was, as she avowed to herself, with a smile and a tear, a little in love with Lewis too. He was so kind, so true, so good a stay and support to all belonging to him; he was (what need to prolong descriptions?) Lewis; and had not all been said in that word for years? Of course Lucy would insist—not undutifully, not untenderly, but steadily, and to the end of her days; there would be no passion, no tragedy, but she would never change. Her mother knew this as well as she knew her child's name, and began to consider, as she wandered about restless, wondering when they would come back again, wondering what they could find to say to each other so long, wondering at Durant's determination and Lucy's courage, how she could make the best of it and reconcile herself to the inevitable. He would be successful in his profession, that there seemed no doubt of now; he would reach, perhaps, the Bench, and then Lucy might be Lady Durant. Lady Curtis shrugged her shoulders at this prospect. She was apt to gibe at her own position, and talk of "we commoners;" but legal honors of that description were lowlier than any lowliness which could be affected by the head of a great county family, tenth baronet, with dormant titles in his race which he did not care to claim. Lady Durant! "granddaughter-in-law of old Durant, you know, the saddler." This was what would be said. Lady Curtis thought she could hear the very sound of the voices lightly tripping over these syllables.

To be sure, many greater ladies than she had accepted the sons of *parvenus* for their daughters. Duchesses did it every day; but then dukes were made for that sort of thing, she said to herself with a smile; were they not a kind of coroneted steam-engines to drag up the lower classes? very different from us commoners. There was always the wool-sack, it is true, an institution which does a great deal for the *noblesse* of the robe. With a whimsical half-amusement she began to calculate whether she was likely to live to see Lewis lord-chancellor. He might do it (if he was ever going to do it) in twenty years. Twenty years would suffice as well as a hundred. Lady Curtis was but forty-seven; there was no particular reason why she should not live as long as that; and such an elevation, of course, would very much sweeten the Lady Durant.

But how long these two were! What could they possibly find to say to each other? It was close upon the hour at which Lewis had ordered his dog-cart, and he had a long drive before him. Then she went to her room and put on her outdoor garments, and went out to meet the lovers. She walked down the avenue half satisfied, half vexed that they had gone so far. Why should they have preferred to get out of sight of the house? And yet it was better that they should not thus suddenly thrust themselves under the observation of Sir John. With a flutter in her bosom of mingled pleasure and pain, she perceived them in the distance. It hurt her infinitesimally, yet consciously, to see her Lucy, her shy, delicate, fastidious *flower of maidenhood*, leaning upon any man's arm *so;* and yet the happiness in Lucy's bosom, was it not almost her own? When she came up to them herself, blushing and half abashed to meet their eyes, the young man was so bold as to come up to her, under her own trees, and kiss her cheek. He had done it once before when she clung to him in the depths of her trouble; but there was a dauntless assurance in this kiss which startled her. She might, perhaps, have crushed him under her frown with severe disapproval, but that the dog-cart at that moment was audible, coming rapidly down upon them. There was no time to be angry when he was going away. She took her daughter's arm when he was gone, drawing it closely into hers as they stood aside to watch him dash down the avenue, for he was late. Lady Curtis held Lucy close, and the daughter clung to the mother; but is the clinging ever so close again, after a man's arm has had that softest, warmest pressure? Lady Curtis, with a sigh, felt the difference—or thought she did, which comes to the same thing.

And as Durant drove away, with his head full of Lucy, he was suddenly transfixed, shot point-blank, as it were, by the eyes of Mrs. Arthur, raised in surprise and alarm to his face. Nancy! here! It was so incredible, and his mind was so preoccupied, that he almost upset his dog-cart, pulling it up with a jerk; then dropped the reins, which had been held so firmly, on the horse's neck. He did not know if he was awake or dreaming as he stumbled down, the surprise was so great, the shock so sudden. Nancy! It seemed to him that there was a kind of suggestion of help, a thread of guidance, thrown out to him by this sudden apparition. He rushed after her, asking one or two gaping wayfarers who had not perceived her who the lady was, as he followed her track; but fear had given wings to Nancy, and she had reached shelter before he came in sight. He wandered about aimlessly for some little time, as has been seen, asking vague questions, and gazing about at the houses. But as nobody had seen the lady to whom he referred, and as in his excitement his description, perhaps, was less clear than usual, he made nothing by his inquiries. They pointed out Mrs. Rolt's house to him, which he knew, and everything in it; and as the evening was already falling, Durant felt himself forced at last to resume his way. He could not make out all that he expected, all that seemed to flutter about through the confusion in his thoughts—possibilities for the future, new lights, new likelihoods; for it must be remembered that his mind was already in a whirl with all that had happened to himself within the last half-dozen hours—more than had happened for the half-dozen years before, or, indeed, during all his life.

There was to be no correspondence; yet Lady Curtis was not surprised to get a letter next day, enclosing one for Lucy.

"Just this once," he pleaded; "and not for mere gratification of writing to her. There is something I want to tell her. You will not refuse me this once."

Lady Curtis did not refuse him. She gave the note to Lucy with a smile and a sigh, and a little shrug of her shoulders.

"What is this great thing he has to tell you, I wonder? The same thing, I suppose, that he took so long to tell you the other day."

"Indeed, it must be something he has forgotten," said Lucy, with simple seriousness; but she took the note up-stairs to read in her own room, running off on pretence of wanting something—a pretence which her mother, with another sigh and shrug of her shoulders, understood well enough. And, indeed, Durant had not failed to take advantage of his opportunity. The little letter was a love-letter, a kind of thing which is too exquisite for common touch; but it had a postscript, which was its *raison d'être.*

"*This is what I shall want to be always telling you, what I shall tell you in my heart daily and hourly till I have you there in real presence, my Lucy,*" the deceiver wrote; and then, with a twist of his hand, in a changed writing even, "But I should not have dared to write but for a strange fact I found out after I left you—ARTHUR'S WIFE IS IN OAKLEY. It seems incredible, but it is true. I saw her on the road. She disappeared, at the sight of me, by a back lane, and must have gone into some house. You will tell them or not, as you please; but I must tell *you.* There seems, I can't quite tell how, hope for ourselves in it. My darling!" And then the other kind of writing began again, with which we sober-minded persons have nothing to do.

Lucy, it may be supposed, was extremely excited by this communication: not just at first, it must be allowed, not till she had read it about six times over, did the real point of it strike her mind. At first it was the other part of the letter that occupied her; and when Lady Curtis said, smiling, "What was the great piece of news—an old enough story, I suppose?" Lucy meant no deception in her response. But by-and-by the fact began to acquire its real importance in her mind. She had no longer a moment's doubt on the subject; had not instinct whispered it to her at once? Nancy was here, within her reach, within her influence; and only one thing could be meant by this — that the rebellious young woman who had made Arthur so unhappy had seen the error of her ways, and was willing to depart from them, to seek the favor of her husband's family, to endeavor to please them, that there might be a reconciliation and universal pardoning of all offence in prospect.

Lucy, when she wholly realized the important fact thus communicated to her, was lost in perplexity. What was she to do? A strange reluctance sprung up in her mind to speak of it, to bring it to any one's observation. Would it not be better to let this strange young woman, by whom Lucy had at once been attracted and repelled, work out her intentions, whatever they were? It was not natural that the young lady should think with special kindness, or, indeed, without a certain prejudice, of this interloper. Lucy's feeling, to start with, had been all in her sister-in-law's favor. Before the marriage had taken place, when the question was whether Arthur should be persuaded or forced into faithlessness to his promise, Lucy had been Nancy's faithful, if reserved, supporter. She had been horrified by the suggestion that a man's plighted word and promised love were not binding, when the woman to whom they were pledged was in an inferior class. This doctrine had shocked and revolted every feeling in her heart; and when her *family had made ignoble efforts to* buy off Nancy, *Lucy had been as indignant as* Arthur was.

But now everything was changed. The resemblances in nature and the diversity in circumstances, which gave her a fellow-feeling with this girl in one stage of her history, gave her a certain sense of repulsion now. She had thought it a mere foolish imagination on her part to identify Mrs. Arthur at the Wren Cottage with Nancy; but even while doing so, Lady Curtis's ready prepossession in her favor, and the easy fascination she had exercised over Sir John, had given Lucy a slight involuntary prick of displeasure. What did they see in this young woman to be so readily pleased by her? She was pretty. Was that all that was necessary? Lucy was in no way injured by it — it took nothing from her, yet she felt more than half angry at the rapid conquest of her parents which the stranger had made. They were quite absurdly interested in her. Why? Sir John spoke of her as if she had been a princess, and even her mother, who, as a woman, should have had more discrimination, had been disposed to rave about this new face, in which, after all, there was no such dazzling beauty as to carry the world by storm. Lucy had been a little vexed with herself for feeling this, yet she had felt it. She had been inclined in her own person to bestow her attention upon the homely sister, who was a good, modest little body and claimed no one's admiration.

And when this strange certainty came to confirm the guess, which even to herself had seemed too fantastic for fact, Lucy felt an instant increase of prejudice, an almost dislike for which she could give no reason, and which was at once impolitic and unkind. Why should her mind turn against Nancy now? Was it not for the interest of the family as well as her own that she should in every way cultivate the possibility of reunion between Arthur and his wife? It must be for Arthur's good that he should be delivered out of his false position, and should live out his life honestly, having chosen it; and it must be to the advantage of the family that its heir should be replaced in his natural place, both for the present and the future. Finally, there could be no doubt whatever that it would be for Lucy's own interest in the new development of her lot. If Arthur was like any other young married man, united to a wife whom his parents had learned to like at least, whether they approved of her or not, how much easier would everything be for the now impossible marriage of the daughter who at present was their only hope!

But it cannot be said that this suggestion of her own lessened value and importance, and the likelihood that Nancy might free her by taking her place in her father's house, was at all an agreeable thought to Lucy Curtis. It might promote her "happiness;" but it certainly, for the moment, did not make her more happy. She was unreasonable—as we all are, more or less. Yes, she would be glad that Arthur should be "happy," that all should go well; but to think of her mother's sudden fancy for this stranger, of her father's swift subjugation, of Nancy holding her own place at Oakley, doing all the things she had done, accepted by everybody as the young lady of the place, this was hard upon Lucy. For the moment it gave her an almost intolerable prick, though she took herself to task for it instantly with hot rage and self-contempt.

How mean and poor! what a wretched, pitiful creature she was!

Then, however, after all this feeling, came the practical side of the matter. Should she let her mother know? Lucy had no secrets from her mother, except indeed that one of her love, before her love had been openly asked for—a thing which not the most tenderly confidential of daughters could be expected to disclose. She made an heroic effort to clear from her mind all prejudice, all momentary and accidental irritation of feeling. Which was best? To let this incognito have its full value, to permit Arthur's wife to have the entire advantage of the effort she was visibly making, and keep her secret? If it were prematurely revealed, it was possible that the effort itself would tell against Nancy, at least with Lady Curtis. To let her do her best, to say nothing, to give her the chance of making them her friends, would not that be the kindest thing that Arthur's sister could do? The conclusion is very easily stated, but it took a long time to arrive at; but it was on this that Lucy decided at last.

"Will you reply for me?" she said to her mother: "no—I am not going to exceed your permission, mamma. I will abide by my promise not to write. Say from me," said Lucy, with a blush, "that I—respond in my heart to all he says; but that at present on all subjects it is best not to speak. Will you tell him that word for word?"

"Faithfully, my darling—and thank you, my Lucy," said the mother, kissing her, with the quick moisture rising in her eyes. Then she added, with a smile, "I suppose I may give him—your love?"

Lady Curtis was not hard upon the young people, after all.

CHAPTER XLI.

Arthur Curtis had not been leading a self-denying or ascetic life; indeed, he had been nearer the depths of moral decadence in the recent months than ever before. He had got reckless about himself and his life; not coarsely reckless, as men are who plunge into the ruder dissipations, but so discouraged and weary that by mere dint of ceasing to care what he did, he had ceased to do well, and almost dropped into the gulf on the opposite side. He had been foolish enough in the past, but his aim had been towards, if not the most exalted objects of ambition, yet those of honesty, truth, faithfulness, and pure living. It might have been unwise to love as he did, so far out of the region he himself belonged to; but at least his love brought no harm to any one, and had no evil thought in it. He had been faithful to it, notwithstanding everything that had come in his way; opposition and entreaty on the side of his family, and partial disgust and discontent on his own, had not moved him; but of what good had all his faithfulness been? What good had his honesty and pure intentions done him? He was stranded upon the shore—laid aside helpless and with little hope from the graver developments of existence. He was bound for life to the wife who had become a stranger to him—who had thrust him away from her; and hopelessly cut off from all other honorable connections, from the happiness of home, from everything which makes up to a young man for the loss of his first freedom.

Arthur had all the evils of that freedom without the good of it; he was bound, yet let loose; tempted to every kind of license, yet in such a position that ordinary and innocent liberty was denied to him. Nothing could be more cruel to a high-spirited young man not trained in the ways of self-denial. And by the time these two years were over he had become sick of it all—the restraints that confined him, the conscience which reminded him of these restraints, and the injured love that gnawed at his heart and felt like rage. What good had come to him of all his efforts to do well—of all the honest meaning of his soul? The gayest and least self-denying of his comrades was better off than he; and he had been on the borders of vice—not compelled by any force of passion, but rather by disgust and unwilling cynicism—the what does it matter?—of the despairing soul. On the borders of vice, and half unbelieving in anything better—half giving up all that was better in this world—trying to persuade himself that nothing mattered. Youth comes to this alternative of happiness very easily. The wisdom which has found out that in happiness, or unhappiness, life jogs on much the same, and that all is not unmitigated evil in the worst circumstances, nor unmitigated good in the best, is an elderly kind of wisdom. But Arthur was impatient of his own hopelessness—he felt his own weariness intolerable; which is as much as to say that neither the hopelessness nor the impatience was entirely genuine, or had half the sway he thought of in his heart.

Their immediate effect, however, was a great bitterness and restlessness, and distaste for everything around him. He had got to hate his new life, his occupations, and the pleasures which perhaps palled more quickly than his occupations, and all that flutter of diplomatic talk, which is so like the flutter of the smallest parish business, but that the topics are more important. Those personal discussions and reports, the "he said" and "she said," which pretend to be of vital importance when the he's and the she's are kings and queens, but are so like common gossip in every other respect, became tiresome beyond description. All this, which had carried him away from his own presumably small affairs at first, and had sounded great and magnificent, sickened him now with its paltriness. "Depend upon it, the emperor meant so and so." "But I assure you Count A—— said—" What was a man the better for this? he asked himself with disdain. Nothing at all the better, much the worse, as having it urged upon his attention that mere gossip and nonsensical bustle and officious fussiness thrust themselves in at the gravest moments, and have a part in the greatest events.

Mrs. Bates discussing the affairs of her chapel and the private dissensions between the minister and the deacons, or a secretary of legation busily calculating how the emperor and Count A—— and Prince B—— contradicted each other, what was the difference? Was it not all petty, miserable, unworthy? What was a man the better of it? And though the *salons* were more lovely and the style of conversation more graceful, was not the subject everywhere much the same as in the parlor at Underhayes, in which Arthur had

made such close acquaintance with the vulgarities of life? He was disgusted with them all. The only good under the sun was surely to enjoy as much as you could where you could, leaving all other considerations aside. Be happy—if that come within your powers—but if not happy, then be amused, if you are able to be so, distracted from your own thoughts, entertained, if not by the love and kindness, at least by the folly and affectations and self-regard, of others. This creed was not naturally to the taste of a frank and open-hearted young man, sympathetic with his fellow-creatures, manly, and friendly, and gentle of heart; but his unhappiness had given him a twist, and all the training he was at present subject to, all the influences round him, led him that way. What did it matter? Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die.

Arthur was on the eve of ceding to this creed. He was on the edge of that pit which is bottomless, and in which there is so little hope; and he might have ended by being a gay infidel, a chill but laughing cynic, even an unbeliever in everything good, who should not only accept that negative of every virtue, but be amused by it—the last degradation. He had all but given in, when Durant's letter telling him of the disappearance of Nancy came suddenly into his life like a thunder-bolt. He had thought as little about Nancy as possible, poor fellow! She was living the life she had chosen to live, under the protection of her parents, in the home she preferred. Arthur knew the half-savage reserve and purity of the girl too well to have any doubt of her honor to him.

It was not that she could transfer her heart to another, but that she had no heart at all so far as he was concerned; not that she was unfaithful in love, but that she could live without love. He had written to her without eliciting any answer at first; then he had ceased to write; he had heard nothing of her for about eighteen months, except that her money was paid; not a sign of her had come to him in all that time. His heart had gone through all the stages of longing, of waiting, of dire anxiety, of lingering hope against hope. And then he had turned resolutely away from the ungrateful one. He never mentioned so much as her name to any one; he gave up his correspondence with Durant; he dropped this past of his in that grave of obscurity into which so many men cast, one after another, in broken pieces, the lives they have thrown away. It was not his fault, or at least it was very far from being all his fault, that these chances of life had been thrown away; but now let them go, and let no one attempt to make any wail over them. She was well off, among the people she liked best; well cared for, cherished as she chose to be cherished, though not as he would have cherished her. Let her be. She was his, but she was not for him, nor could any one else be for him. She had desolated the life which he had consecrated to her. Henceforward there was a blank in it which she would not, and which no one else could fill. The legitimate ties, the purer hopes were over.

But there were other solaces more cheaply to be had—if he could have persuaded himself to accept those husks which the swine eat; and to these last degrading feasts he was making up his mind, when suddenly Durant's news came into his life like a thunder-bolt, breaking the stagnation of the unwholesome air. This woman, who belonged to him, was, like himself, alone in the world. The humble coterie which she had preferred to him was broken up. All that she had loved and clung to had gone from her. Perhaps she too might have felt, even before this, the dreariness of that existence, deprived of its closest tie, to which she had condemned him; but at least she must feel it now. Everything had gone from her—the shelter of her father's house, the natural protection and moral support which perhaps had kept her in her error, but which must have failed her now along with everything else.

The first feeling in Arthur's mind was a keen pity for Nancy. She had done him grievous wrong, she had wasted all their mutual chances of happiness; but she was young, inexperienced, foolish, a child playing with the most dangerous elements, not knowing any better, and now the time had come when she must bear the penalty too. But when he realized the results of the misfortune that had befallen his wife, and heard that she had left Underhayes and thrown up the allowance which he had been so much surprised and disappointed and satisfied to find her accept at first, Arthur's heart swelled with a more generous, more happy sentiment than had touched it for months before. Had not this been one of the things which had disgusted him most with human nature, though he had never put it into words? The thought that his wife when she left him, though she would not accept love from him, would accept money—humiliating, degrading thought! With a start and sudden thrill of recognition, he heard that she had thrown it aside now, and this one fact threw light to him upon all that went before, and seemed to bring her back to him cleared of a thousand misapprehensions. At last he recognized again his Nancy, proud, rash, daring, imprudent, capable of any outburst of passionate folly, but not of mercenary calculation or the prudence of a deliberate bargain.

He saw it all now, he thought; and in his thoughts did—could any one wonder?—as much injustice to the poor vulgar couple in their graves, who were not any more mercenary than poverty compelled them to be, as he had formerly done to his hot-headed and foolish wife. It had been their fault; they had forced her into this vulgar settlement which had so revolted him, this compounding for the injuries of the heart by an allowance. Had he not known all along that it could not be Nancy? What could be more unlike Nancy, so independent, so defiant, so rash and regardless of all dictates of prudence as she had been? It had been a mystery to him, and burning pain all through; but now he recognized her again. It was as if suddenly, after long obliteration from his memory, her face, with all the characteristic defects and imperfections of its beauty, defects far more sweet than the faulty faultlessness of others, had all at once gleamed upon him out of the gloom.

Perhaps—how could he tell?—if he had been less distant, if she had been less proud, she might have turned to him in her grief and loneliness, sought his natural support, his natural consolation; but at least she had vindicated herself by that hasty, foolish, immediate action. If not

love, then not money, no bargain, no mercenary advantage. Through the gloom, through the distance, flashing with anger, veiled with tears, Nancy's eyes seemed suddenly to gleam upon him; Nancy's voice, faltering yet firm, to fling at him a defiance, a challenge—was it an appeal? There came from Arthur's breast a sudden burst of cries and laughter mingled, and his eyes in his solitude filled with tears, salt and scalding, but sweet. And as he sat there alone he blushed fiery-red over brow and throat. To what ignoble rivalship, what miserable partaking, had he almost degraded his wife! But, Heaven be praised! this voice out of the darkness had come in time.

And at first it did not occur to him that this sudden and prompt vindication of herself, which set Nancy right, brought external consequences with it which might alarm any man. What could she do to make up for the loss of her living which must ensue? She would be not only an orphan and friendless — but also penniless, with nothing, and no one to keep her from want. This is a thought which might well appall a man used to all the resources of wealth, and who had no notion how poor people contrive to stumble on, and keep body and soul together, upon no income at all. A shiver of pain got into Arthur's being at thought of the sacrifices and straits she might be driven to; though that was not half so powerful at first as the relief and satisfaction of the other discovery that she was herself still—foolish, rash, passionate, but not mercenary. It grew upon him, however, as the days went on, and no answer came to the letter he wrote instantly, imploring Durant (whose time and labors seemed to his friends to belong to them) to lose no time in finding Nancy.

As it happened, and as it happens so often in the emergencies of individual history, Arthur could not at that moment rush home himself, as he would have done almost at any other time, to rescue his wife from her self-imposed privations, whatever they might be. His chiefs were absent, there was a lull in diplomatic business; and it was his duty to remain at his post, to note the small gossip of the court, and chronicle all the small beer, and make into national importance the scraps of remark that fell from Count A—— and Prince B——.

For a month or more he was kept doing this, chafing at every day as it passed, and growing more and more excited, more and more anxious. By-and-by Durant wrote that he was making every possible research, but had as yet discovered nothing. And then there arose a very fever of anxious thought in Arthur's mind. Where could she be? what might she be doing? what privations might she be enduring, what toils, what hardships? All the stories of distress he had ever heard, of proud poverty, of struggles for employment, of Spartan independence starving calmly sooner than ask for a morsel, all the taunts and spurns which patient merit from the unworthy takes, came rushing upon his recollection.

While he lived daintily and slept softly, his Nancy, his wife, might be turning away discouraged, penniless, without shelter, from some door which was closed upon her. Heaven above! what could he do? He sent wild advertisements to the *Times*, he wrote ceaseless letters to Durant. Find her! was his cry; though indeed Nancy was spending her time, on the whole, very comfortably, as the reader knows. But Arthur did not think of the little fortune—the two hundred and fifty pounds which was to have been handed over to her sisters. Nothing had been done about it, and it had not found a place in his memory; he did not think of anything reasonable, he only lost himself in a vague cloud of excitement, terror, and anxiety, intensified by the fact that it was impossible for him to get away, and to go in search of her himself. And his troubles were made tenfold greater still by a chance meeting with his Paris friend, Denham, who "thought he had seen" Mrs. Arthur Curtis somewhere, but could not recollect where.

Denham knew, as everybody did, that the husband and wife were separated; and he was curious, and ventured upon some leading question to which Arthur in his state of suspense fell a ready victim. He did not conceal that he was anxious, "not having heard from his wife for some time," he allowed; and then Denham, on his side, recollected that he had seen her somewhere; where was it he had seen her? was it in Paris, was it London? He had quite lately come from England; and he could not recollect where it was—at a railway-station somewhere — but where? The impression left upon Arthur's mind was that she might be coming to him, and this beguiled his anxiety for a few days, making him tremble at every strange sound, and expect day and night her arrival—which never came. This final trial made an end of him, poor fellow! It ruined his chance of sleep, so that his nights and days alike became torment to him. And the probation lasted for more than a month after he had heard that Nancy had left Underhayes—a month, which felt like a century.

It was far on in November when at last he was released from his post, and could start for home. For home! Where was that? he asked himself, sadly. Could it now exist anywhere for him except where she was, who was a part of him, who had no one now but himself, and who, by rejecting that last material tie between them, had caught back the sick heart which had begun to flutter downward? But never, never again, could he fall back into that disgusted and weary infidelity of thought.

All this time his pride and his reviving affection had kept him from communicating his anxiety to his family. They did not know Nancy as he did; they would not think of her as he did, that was certain. Their pride would be hurt by the idea of poverty or distress falling upon her, but not their hearts touched. If they should happen to hear of her as laboring, perhaps, for daily bread, a poor needle-woman, a poorer teacher, they would think of her not nobly, but ignobly, as driven to it by folly, not forced by proud independence. He would not say anything to them. He did not even let them know that he was coming back. Whether he went to Oakley or not would depend upon many other things, and he was full of the unconscious cruelty which springs from preoccupation and partial indifference. He did not think what would be the feelings of his father and mother when they heard he was in England, but as much apart from them as if he were still in Vienna. What were they in comparison with Nancy? Nancy,

who was young, poor, lonely, without guardian or helper. All the fathers and mothers in the world were nothing compared with her. This is not a pleasant consideration for the fathers and mothers; but yet it was true.

A few days were necessarily lost in travelling; and what so good as the long, compulsory seclusion of a railway-carriage — shutting you absolutely up with yourself, while the long lines of country, plain, and hill sweep past, and all the outside hurry and bustle do nothing but make the whirling silence of the box in which you are enclosed more complete—for the feeding of anxiety and cherishing of all troublous thoughts? The mere certainty that he must not surrender himself to his fears had given him a certain power of self-control so long as he remained at Vienna, which now abandoned him altogether. His mind was in a fever by the time he reached London. It was late at night, and the only thing he could do was to throw himself into a cab and drive to Durant's chambers in the Temple, where, in all the commotion of his feverish thoughts, he was brought to a sudden stand-still by the information that Durant was out of London, engaged on the business of the Commission on which he had been appointed. He had not even heard of this commission; for Lewis had been reluctant to write of the many events which had lately occurred, not knowing what his friend might think of his own half-permitted betrothal, or whether it was not best that Nancy should have an undisturbed moment to make her way with the family at Oakley.

This had kept Durant silent for longer than was perhaps quite friendly; but, as fate would have it, he had taken heart of grace at last, and had written to Arthur on the very day on which Arthur had left Vienna; and the letter which would have given so much information arrived in the one capital just as the person to whom it was addressed reached the other. He was cruelly disappointed by Durant's absence: it seemed something like a crime, in the confusion of his thoughts. What was any public commission in the world to the commission which affected his friend's happiness, the succor of a woman who was to that friend more than all the world besides? Arthur could scarcely keep his patience even with the innocent laundress who answered his questions. He went into his friend's room, and found there his own letter announcing his coming, which had arrived only a few hours before him, and which he tore vehemently into a hundred pieces. But all his rage and vehemence could do nothing for him. He was obliged to go away, to go to a hotel, and, in utter impossibility of doing anything, to eat and to sleep, which, perhaps, saved him from a fever. It was all that could be done that night.

CHAPTER XLII.

To know something which those about you do not know—to keep something secret which would interest them above measure, and affect their conduct, but which you, in your superior wisdom, believe it better they should not know—this *is to play* a very difficult part, one of the most *difficult in life. And if you* undertake it without possessing the necessary qualities of reticence and self-control; with, on the contrary, all the habits of an innocent life, the traditions of family frankness and intercommunication of everything, great or small; and if, to add to all these difficulties, you have been in the habit of living with one other close companion, as if you and she had possessed between you but one soul—it may be imagined how hard the task will be. This was what Lucy Curtis had undertaken to do. She had no idea, when she undertook it, how hard it was.

In a glow of determined generosity and good meaning towards the woman of whom, in her inmost soul, she felt jealous as receiving regard and attention to which she had no right, she had taken this herculean task upon her shoulder, and now she would not shrink from it; but it was hard beyond all belief to carry it out. A hundred times a day the name of Nancy was trembling on her lips. Between her mother and herself, the conversation was not talking so much as thinking aloud. Everything was common between them—their thoughts, the occurrences of their life, their reading, their speculations—they did everything *à deux*, as even husband and wife cannot do, as perhaps only mother and daughter ever succeed in doing. The differences of character between them, the difference between Lady Curtis's experience, and those touches of the world which inevitably in nearly fifty years of living modify the character, and Lucy's youthfulness of certainty — her stronger convictions and more absolute perceptions of good and evil —these gave the necessary tinge of individuality to their utterances. But there had never been any reserves between these two.

Thus when Lucy made up her mind to keep Durant's intimation of Nancy's near presence to herself, she undertook a burden for which her strength was scarcely fit. To help herself to bear it, she said to herself that she had as yet no certainty on the subject; that she was not sure that the woman Durant had seen was Mrs. Arthur; and that she herself, having once seen her brother's wife, did not recognize her now, though compelled by a hundred circumstances to believe that this was she. No, she said to herself, she had no legal warrant, no certainty sufficiently strong to justify her in disturbing the minds of her parents by a guess which perhaps might turn out mistaken. It would disturb their minds greatly.

Their kindly prepossession in favor of the stranger was not strong enough to bear such an interruption, and they would be entirely at a loss what to do, what Arthur would wish them to do, what would be most expedient in the painful circumstances. If Nancy was known to be Arthur's wife, she could not remain there without acknowledgment from Arthur's family; and how could they adopt her into their bosom when it was she who had separated from her husband, sent him away from her, ruined his life? She could not be at variance with her husband, and in friendship with his father and mother—parted from him, but received by them. No, that was impossible; and when nobody even knew whether it was Nancy! It might be quite another person whom Lewis had seen—it might be some one from Oakenden, the nearest town, come over for the day. It might

man's wife of the next parish, young Mrs. Brown, who was lately married and not much known in the neighborhood. It might be—half a dozen people: why should it be Mrs. Arthur, of Wren Cottage? If this were, indeed, Nancy, the wife of Arthur Curtis, was it at all probable that she would have taken so transparent a disguise? All these arguments Lucy went over to herself, feeling that they were futile. In her own mind, she had no doubt that Mrs. Arthur at the cottage was her sister-in-law, and that Lewis had seen her, and that she had fled from him. But these were simply ideas of her own, no more; and even if they were facts, and proved true, what end could be served by telling her mother? Was it not better to wait, to see what might happen, to let events shape themselves? But oh! how hard—how much harder than any one could have supposed it was!

Lady Curtis, on her side, was secretly grieved with her child. She did not make any complaint; she reasoned with herself, indeed, against the pain she felt, saying to herself that it was natural Lucy should be preoccupied, should talk less freely when they sat together, should have less to say to her mother. Had she not another now for whom she would store up all those outflowings of the heart which had been her mother's alone? She was, she knew and humbly avowed to herself, ridiculously ready to be wounded, and felt the smallest little unconscious prick from those she loved; but she must be just to Lucy. There was nothing wanting in Lucy that any reasonable mother could wish for; but only they two had been all in all to each other, and Lady Curtis felt that to Lucy she was no longer all in all. Long silences would come between them while she worked at her crewels, and Lucy carried on the varied occupations of a young lady's afternoon—a young lady who is a parish sovereign, and has a great many small yet important public affairs on hand. Those silences Lady Curtis set down to Durant's account, and felt a something growing in her mind very different from her former affection for Lewis, which she endeavored with all her might to crush, without finding it easy to do so. It was natural, and she must be just; while all the time it was not Lewis that was in fault.

Fortunately, Lucy herself did not even know that her mother had discovered her embarrassed self-consciousness, and had not the slightest notion that it was set down to the account of Lewis. And thus a little something, which was not so much as a cloud, a mist upon the clear sky, a fantastic vapor, but presaging storm and darkness, began to breathe between them. They were disappointed in each other; sympathy somehow seemed to fail between them. Was it that her mother was *exigeante*, Lucy asked herself, even—painful word—jealous? It was that Lucy had some one else to love, that she was no longer of first importance to her child, the mother thought; and the fact was that both were wrong, that it was neither jealousy on the one side nor desertion on the other, but Nancy—nothing but a secret, the most innocent of secrets, and the most well-intentioned, that did the wrong.

And the more her thoughts dwelt on this subject, and the more apparent it became to Lucy's mind that she must not betray her discovery, the more curious she grew about the object of it all. Never a parish day came now that she did not pay a visit to Mrs. Arthur. This was not always successful, for Mrs. Arthur was often out, as Lucy thought, to avoid her; but on these occasions she would talk to the sister, whose name nobody knew. Lucy called her Miss Arthur, with a keen glance of scrutiny, and saw by Matilda's little start and her sudden look, as if about to contradict her, that this was not her name; but she thought better of it after a moment's consideration, and allowed herself to be called Miss Arthur for the rest of the interview. And Lucy had little difficulty in eliciting from Matilda all the particulars of her family history which did not touch Nancy—how their parents were dead, how their only brother had gone to New Zealand; and Matilda did not conceal that she hoped to follow Charley, and, indeed, to that intention was busy with all the chemises at which Lucy beheld her working.

"It will be a long voyage," Matilda said, "and one requires a large supply."

"But will your sister go too?"

"My sister? I have two sisters, Miss Curtis. One is very well married in the place where we used to live. I have heard them say that if Charley did very well, and there seemed a good opening, they wouldn't mind; for what is New Zealand nowadays?—not much farther than France used to be, father always liked to say."

"But I meant your sister here, Mrs. Arthur. Will it not be very dreary for her if you go away?"

"Oh, my sister, Mrs. Arthur! She is very different from the rest of us; things are not with her as with the rest of us. I cannot take it upon me to say what she will do."

While this conversation was going on, Lady Curtis, who had walked down the length of the avenue to look for Lucy, met Mrs. Arthur coming over the stile, and stopped to talk to her.

"I see you have got some lovely leaves again; are you going to draw them? You must have quite a genius for art-work."

"Oh no, no genius for anything," said Nancy, with the swift flushes of sudden change going over her face which Lady Curtis always called forth. She was more at her ease when there was nobody looking on. She had the feeling that she must be supposed to be "currying favor" with Lady Curtis when there was a third person present. "No genius; it has been always my ruin that I am so stupid," said Nancy, with a serious air, which looked very piquant and amusing in conjunction with such words.

"Your ruin, my dear? I hope you are far from ruin, anyhow; and I don't think it could possibly come on that score," said Lady Curtis, with a smile.

"Ah!" said Nancy, with her whole heart in the sigh that came from her red lips, "no one can tell another's troubles. I have had many; but they have all come because I was so stupid; though after I have said a wrong thing, I always feel that it is wrong, and know what I ought to have said; but it is too late then, it only makes it worse," she breathed forth with a long sighing breath.

"Well," said Lady Curtis, still smiling, "I don't know what wrong things you may have done; but that is the best that can happen to you, for you will remember next time to say, not the wrong thing, but the right."

"Ah!" said Nancy again, with great, serious eyes; "but that is exactly what I cannot learn to do! It is not badness, it is stupidness. I make the same mistakes, and do the same faults, and speak as I ought not to speak."

"Poor girl!" said Lady Curtis, touched by the tears that came while Mrs. Arthur spoke. "This is a sad experience for you. I hope it is not so serious as you seem to think. I am a great deal older than you are," she went on, still more touched as a big tear fell, looking like a small ocean on Nancy's black sleeve, "and if I can help you, or give you any advice, I should be glad to do so. Our experience is not worth much unless we can help younger people with it; and though I do not know you, I take an interest in you."

"Oh, you are kind, very kind!" cried Nancy, a brilliant flush darting all over her face. "I never thought any one could be so kind; but my troubles are all of my own bringing on," she added, quickly; "and the worst is, I can't do anything. No, no one could do anything. Did you mean really you would like the pattern—those poor natural things?" (there was a wistful look in her eyes, but she tried to laugh, and shook off the tears): "they don't seem worth the attention of a lady like you."

"I am afraid you are a little goose," said Lady Curtis, patting Nancy's hand with her own. It was the only way she could show the sympathy which rose so warmly within her, she could scarcely tell why. "Nature is as much worth a queen's attention as a beggar's. And yes, indeed, I should like the pattern. Will you really make it for me? But you must come to the Hall and see my work; and Sir John wants very much to make your acquaintance. It was you, was it not, that opened the gate for him?"

"Yes." Another vivid flush covered Nancy's face; she grew prettier and prettier as she grew thus animated, wavering from one emotion to another. This time it seemed all pleasure, warming her all over, and making her countenance glow.

"He has done nothing but rave about you ever since. I shall be jealous if you don't mind. Will you come to-morrow?"

"Not to-morrow," said Nancy, her face changing like a sunset sky. "Oh, Lady Curtis, you are too good to me! You don't know me—"

"No, not much; but everything must have a beginning," said the gracious lady. "We must settle upon a day. If not to-morrow, let it be Saturday. That will give you four days to make up your mind. You must come up early to luncheon, and Lucy and I will show you all there is to see. If you meet Lucy, will you tell her I am going slowly up the avenue waiting for her? She should be on her way home now."

Nancy went away with her head full of excitement and a hundred conflicting thoughts. She met Lucy at the corner of the village street, who looked at her with investigating eyes. "Whom has she been talking to, to make her look so bright, yet so agitated?" Lucy asked herself. Surely it could not be Bertie, who had passed but a little time before? The jealousy of a tiger suddenly sprung up in Lucy's mind. If this girl came here to conciliate the family, yet under *their very eyes looked like this* because of the *admiration of another man!*

"Miss Curtis, I have just met—" (Nancy did not like to say "your mother," that seemed too familiar; and "her ladyship," as Matilda said, was too like a servant) "Lady Curtis. She said I was to tell you that she was in the avenue waiting for you. She is very kind," said Nancy, with a little appealing look. "She said I was to come to the Hall. Does she really mean me to come, Miss Curtis? You will tell me true?"

"Do you think my mother says what she does not mean?" cried Lucy, herself half touched, half angry; for she felt now that she did not want to like this girl, whose secret she alone knew—and yet there was danger that she might be made to like her. The creature looked beautiful, something had inspired her. She had never looked so nearly beautiful before. "Of course she means you to come; what else could you suppose?"

"I did not know that—people were so kind," said Nancy, in a very low tone. Then she looked at Lucy, half wistful, half suspicious. Lucy was not like the rest; there was a mixture of feelings in her which did not exist in the others, a complication of sentiment which Nancy divined, though she could not have told how. "I will come if you say so," she said.

"Then come," said Lucy, holding out her hand, with a sudden movement. "And good-bye. I must run, if my mother is waiting for me—" She hurried away for other reasons too. It seemed to her as if she must say something, disclose her knowledge, encourage Nancy to win the favor of her father and mother if she lingered a moment longer. "Is it because she is so pretty?" Lucy asked herself; "if I were a gentleman, perhaps!" As a matter of fact, women are absurdly subject to this spell of beauty; but we have been taught to think that it is not so, and most people believe as they are taught; so Lucy supposed it must have been something else which moved her, and suddenly made her forget her prejudices. She hurried on after her mother, who was still lingering in the avenue. It was early afternoon still, but the short winter day was already waning.

"You are late," Lady Curtis said, when she came up. "I thought, as it gets dark so soon, I would come and meet you." This was one of the many little pathetic additions to her ordinary tender ways which Lady Curtis made, partially unawares, to conciliate her child.

"Thank you, mamma. I met Mrs. Arthur, and she told me you were here."

"Yes, I met her, too. How pretty she is! and she made me such curious, pretty speeches. Is it humility, is it pride? I cannot understand. I think that young woman must have a history."

"I suppose most people have," said Lucy.

"You know what I mean," said Lady Curtis. "She took to telling me about her faults, poor thing! *à propos de bottes.* It was quite uncalled for; but confidence, whoever it may be that gives it, is always touching. I suppose it feels like a compliment. It is always complimentary when people trust in you." Here she gave her daughter's arm a little soft pressure. Lucy felt it, but misunderstood it, as was natural. It felt the very softest, tenderest reproaches for something withheld; but Lucy misunderstood one thing and Lady Curtis meant quite another. Therefore now they came to an under-

standing, though still a mistaken one. "If I ever keep anything from you, mamma," she cried, "it is only because—because—"

"My darling!" said the mother, holding her child's arm close within her own, "do you think I don't understand?" and she gave a little sigh.

What was it she did or did not understand? Lucy was wholly puzzled; and then they fell to talking of other things—of the parish, and how many flannel petticoats and pairs of blankets should be ordered for Christmas; and about the little cookery-school, which was Lucy's present hobby—how nicely Annie Bird, the model girl, made the soup for the sick; and then, changing from that, wondered when Arthur's next letter would come, and told each other that they did not like the tone of the last one. Poor Arthur! would it be possible to have him home for Christmas? Surely, Lady Curtis said, he did not intend to stay permanently out of England because of that dreadful wife of his. That would be hard indeed upon his own family, who loved him. And thus they beguiled the way up the darkling avenue, with their faces turned towards the lights of home. Oh, if Arthur would only come home! There at least he would find nothing but tenderness, not a word to cross him, poor fellow! nothing to put him in mind of the wife who had made a waste and wilderness of his life.

While her mother spoke so, it may be supposed how Lucy trembled, so much that at last Lady Curtis took note of it, and asked, in some alarm, what was the matter—did she think she had taken cold? did she feel ill? No, Lucy said, hurrying on, she had taken no cold; but she was chilly, she had felt it all the afternoon; and then Lady Curtis hurried her into the warm blaze of the morning-room, and to the warm tea, which Sir John came in to share, almost as soon as they got in-doors. He thought it was very cold, too—seasonable weather, such as ought to herald Christmas. Then he heard the little budget of news. He was delighted to hear of Annie Bird's proficiency with the soup, and still more delighted that the lady of the gate, the pretty stranger, was coming on Saturday. The one fact was not much more important than the other, in the old man's eyes.

CHAPTER XLIII.

Nancy went very quickly along the village street: the red-brown leaves were dropping from her hands; she had forgotten them; her mind was full of excitement, and her eyes of light and life. If Arthur could have seen her at that moment—he who was just now arriving in England, full of anxious thoughts about her, thinking of her as perhaps in want, certainly in poverty, struggling against adverse fate—he would scarcely have known his wife. Never during all the time he had known her had Nancy looked so brilliantly vigorous, and indeed happy. She was happy, in a way—happy in the stir of living that was in her mind, the sense of an emergency that would call forth all her powers, and that potential consciousness of active existence which is sometimes better even than happiness. All her faculties were in vigorous exercise, her mind was busy with plans and thoughts. She had that to encounter which might have made the bravest woman in her circumstances quail; but it only strung her nerves, and made her feel the strength within her tingling to her very finger-points. Rash, impulsive, hot-headed she was, as she had always been; but the jar and twist of unhappy pride, of false position, of conscious ignorance and inferiority and struggling self-assertion were gone.

She went rapidly up the village between the rows of cottages, with their little lamps lighted, and past the glow which Mrs. Rolt's window threw out into the evening. The rector and the doctor were going to dine with Cousin Julia that night, and the table was already laid, and showed its modest grandeur frankly to the gazers outside, who thought it very fine indeed. Mrs. Rolt had asked Nancy to that dinner; and, though she had declined to go, she cast a glance through the wire blinds at the lighted interior and the laid-out table, with a pleasant consciousness that she might have been there had she pleased. And then she went across to the Wren Cottage, where Matilda, more careful than Mrs. Rolt, had drawn down the blinds when she lighted the lamp. She was seated, as usual, at her chemises; but she was not so comfortable as usual, for she had been beguiled into telling Miss Curtis a good deal about the family, and had mentioned the name of Underhayes, and that of Nancy—all things which, in the code of private instructions drawn out for her when she came here, were accounted capital crimes. But Matilda did not feel that she was called upon to disclose these errors. She was, however, "talkative and unconciliatory," very willing to hear of the encounters Nancy might have had, and to give an account, with reserves, of her own. Nancy came in, opening the door, which opened innocently from the outside, as is the way in most country places. She threw herself down in the first chair she came to, and put down her leaves ("nasty wet rubbish, enough to give her her death of cold!") upon the table on which Matilda already, though it was too early to have it, yet, for the sake of cheerfulness, had set out the tea. And then Nancy looked straight into the lamp, with eyes that seemed to give out as much light, so brilliant, so shining, that Matilda, though so familiar with them, was struck with surprise.

"How can you stare into the light so, Nancy?" she said; "you will ruin your eyes."

"Shall I? It does not hurt them."

"It is all very well to say that now; but wait till you are older. Mother used to say there was nothing so bad. Ah, Nancy, you have taken things into your own hands—dear old mother's rules don't count for much now."

"Indeed they do," cried Nancy, with sudden tears; "indeed they do, and will, whatever happens! I am not unfaithful. Those that I love, if I love them once, I love them forever, dead or alive."

"Ah!" said Matilda, with a tone of interrogation in her voice. It was not clear what she was thinking of; but Nancy's quick temper and restless spirit divined at once.

"You mean Arthur? Well then, and I mean it too. All the same I do. I mayn't have just shown it—always; but I do mean it—and will, if I should live a hundred years."

"I wonder at you, Nancy! Why don't you

write, then, and tell him? I never knew whether you did or didn't till this moment; and it looked a great deal more like didn't. He thought so, I'm sure."

"Could I give you the sense to see, either to him or you?" cried Nancy, with quick scorn. She did not know that Dr. Johnson had declared it impossible to furnish understanding. And then she threw up her arms with a sudden fine gesture, tossing down the red-brown winterly leaves, and shaking the tea-table with its load. "Oh, what am I to do?" she cried, "what am I to do? I am going to the Hall on Saturday; they want me to go, they have all asked me to go; and Lady Curtis called me 'my dear.' But she didn't know who I was. And I am deceiving them, Matty. It is the same as telling a lie. I have done a great many wicked things," said Nancy, "but I never told a lie. How am I to go and sit at their table, and look in their faces, and all the time it will be a lie?"

"What will be a lie?" said sober-minded Matilda. "You don't need to say anything that isn't true. It is not as if you had changed your name. You are Mrs. Arthur, and you would be Mrs. Arthur, whatever happened. I do believe Miss Lucy suspects something; she has a way of taking things so quietly, as if nothing was new to her. And anyhow, if the very worst should come to the worst, why, you're not compelled to go."

"But I will go," said Nancy, with flashing eyes. "Oh, just to be there, to see it all, to know just where he would have taken me, where I might have lived if I hadn't been a— I will go! I have made up my mind to that. She called me 'my dear'—did I tell you she called me 'my dear?'—and said old Sir John had raved about me, and begged me to go." The vivid blush of pleasure came back to Nancy's face as she spoke, and her eyes again blazed, opposite the lamp, like rival yet reflecting lights. A vague smile came upon her face; there was a little vanity in it—pleased satisfaction with the conquests she had made. Then a cloud came suddenly over it. "But all the same it will be cheating! oh, it will be cheating, Matty! I won't give it up; but you may begin to pack the boxes," said Nancy, suddenly. "After I have been there, I shall have to tell them everything, and we must go away."

"Go away! I think you are out of your senses, Nancy! We have just paid the second month in advance, and they will never give it back; and consider how expensive it is travelling with so much luggage—everything we have in the world. I thought," said Matilda, aggrieved, "that we should at least have stayed here, now that we are here, till something was settled, till you had made up your mind one way or other."

"I have made up my mind. When we came here I never thought they would take any notice of us. Why should they have taken any notice of us—a couple of poor girls in a small cottage, not knowing any one? I wanted just to see what kind of people they were, that was all," said Nancy, earnestly. "I never thought of anything more. Why should they have thought of us at all? We were quite out of their way."

"Well," said Matilda, to whom it appeared *that here was a good opportunity* of showing her own superior judgment, "that was because you thought they were not very nice people. You made up your mind about them before you knew them. But they *are* nice people. I never wish to see a more kind lady than her ladyship is."

"Matty, dear, I don't mean to be nasty; but if you would say Lady Curtis, not her ladyship—remember that she is my mother-in-law."

Once more that vivid blush, too bright for anything but pleasure, came over Nancy's face. How much scorn, how much defiance, what attempts at insult she had lavished upon Lady Curtis's name! But Arthur's mother had called her "my dear," had looked at her kindly with soft eyes; and it had come to pass, by some subtle process, that Nancy felt herself to belong to this soft-eyed lady more than she did to good honest Matilda, who had stood by her so stoutly, but who naturally retained the manners of her class, which was not Nancy's class any more.

"Stuff and nonsense!" said Matilda. "She's not *my* mother-in-law. She's very kind, but she's a deal superior to me; and I'll speak respectful, whatever you think. They *are* nice people, as I was saying. Miss Lucy is what I call a perfect lady" (this, too, jarred upon Nancy's new-born fastidiousness; but she did not venture to hint that "Miss Curtis" would be more correct); "and when they saw two young women by themselves, like you and me, of course they took notice. In their own village these sort of folks are like kings and queens," said Matilda; "everything belongs to them. It's not like just being better off. I understand the feeling myself; it's like what mother used to have for the poor things in the court, to see they went on all straight, and sent their children to school, and so forth. Mother was not a great lady, but she was known in the place, and took a charge like; and she was a good woman. There's a kind of a likeness in good folks," said Matilda, turning away her head. The mother's loss was still recent, and made their eyes wet unawares when they spoke of her; but this time Nancy was too much preoccupied to enter into the allusion. Her own thoughts surged up and deadened her appreciation of what her sister said; though Matilda's ideas, if not brilliant, were often the most sensible of the two.

"Yes," said Nancy, after a pause, "that's how it must be. I don't want to leave this little place. I like it; I think I like the country. It may be dull, but it's nice."

"Very nice," said Matilda, looking at her seventh chemise affectionately as she finished the trimming and folded it up, giving little pats of satisfaction to each fold, "when you have anything you want to get done with. I should have taken twice the time to do my things if we had stayed at Underhayes."

"But we must go," said Nancy, continuing. "We might have stayed on if they had taken no notice, if we had kept ourselves shut up, and not seen them; but it can't be helped now. I will go to the Hall, just to see everything. Fancy sitting down at table with them, being like one of them! It will feel like a dream. Oh, I must, I must go just once! If ever Arthur should come back again—"

"Of course Arthur will come back again. If you tell them who you are, as you say you will, Arthur will come first train; and do you think

nowadays that folks can hide themselves like they used to do in the story-books, Nancy? You may run away as much as you like, they'll have you back again. They will set the detectives after you. Them that have far greater reason to hide than you have get found out, and do you think you can keep safe? Nonsense! Once tell them, and you'll soon be fetched back."

"Never!" cried Nancy. "Against my will, with detectives sent after me! I will go to New Zealand first with you, or anywhere. Never! It is not forcing that will ever hold me."

"I believe there is nothing silly you wouldn't do, if it came to that," said Matilda, shaking her head. It was an unwise suggestion she had made; but after a while Nancy calmed down, and gathered up her leaves again, and proceeded to arrange them as was her custom. She had altogether given up the beautiful chalk cartoon which Matilda admired for this rubbish. How silly it was! her sister thought; though, indeed, her ladyship was to blame, who had encouraged Nancy in this nonsensical occupation. "What is going to be the good of all that?" she asked at last, with a touch of sarcasm in her voice. "You can't frame it and put it up on the wall, to make a room look nice. It's only lumber, and gathers dust."

"I am drawing something for Lady Curtis to work," said Nancy, with some solemnity. "When I go into the house the first time, I shall take something with me *to give her*. I suppose you will say that is silly too, but I like to do it. *She* thinks they are good for something. She was quite interested, you know. Did I tell you, Matilda, she called me 'my dear?'"

"Oh yes, you told me, sure enough," said Matilda, with a little impatience, "three times over;" and she got up to put away the seventh chemise along with the others. It was trimmed with her own work, nice little scallops worked in button-hole stitch, with three holes in each curve, very neat and strong; and she was pleased at once with the feeling of successful production and personal property. She gave the little heap another affectionate pat as she laid this one on the top. Seven new chemises, every stitch of which would bear inspection! Matilda felt that she had justification for a little pride. She did not sit down again to begin another, but put on the kettle, that it might come to the point of perfect boiling before she made the tea; and it was pleasant to see her moving about in the pleasant fire-light, her substantial and round but neat person, clothed in a black-and-white gown, her brown hair smooth and shining. Matilda was very particular about the due amount of crape on her Sunday dress, and you may be sure would not put off her mourning a day sooner than the most rigid rule allowed. But in the house, with all her little domestic occupations, she thought the black-and-white best. "For crape goes if you look at it, and black so soon gets rusty," she said. It looked more natural, as well as more cheerful and pleasant, that the fire should have something to brighten upon and throw ruddy tints over; and it was comfortable to see her make the tea. What a lucky New Zealander that man would be who got Matilda, with all her nicely trimmed chemises, for his wife!

But with Nancy, poor Nancy, it was altogether another affair. It is a rash thing to come out of the world in which you were born. She had done it unintentionally, vowing with vehement asseverations that nothing would change her. And how she had struggled against all poor Arthur's attempts! how she had clung, as it were, with clutching of desperate hands to the fabric of her original home! Those very corrections which she made in Matilda's honest diction, had she not hotly resented them, fiercely refused them, when Arthur had tried to suggest them to herself? But all that was changed. Nancy had drifted away from her own world—drifted into his? If she clutched at anything now, it was not at her old ark, but at the slippery rocks and sands of the other hemisphere on which she had been cast ashore. Falling upon it in her first footing, she had secretly kissed the soil as conquering invaders have done, to avert the evil omen.

She belonged no longer to that old universe which had been buried with the father and mother, the last lingering traces of which were to be carried away in Matilda's trunks along with her careful outfit; but the other world had not yet received the trembling, unavowed neophyte. Even now, rather than be brought into it by any formal force, by sense of duty, by the necessity laid upon her husband and his family, or by their pity, or by anything that could be construed into either, Nancy would have kept her wild word, and rushed away into the distant wilds with her sister. Had there been a word, or thought, of "arrangement," of negotiation, even of right on the other side to claim her, or of right on her side to a certain place as Arthur's wife, no request, no persuasion would have induced Nancy to accept what was thus settled for her. She did not even know what she would accept as a solution of the difficulty—even Arthur, did he stand before, holding out his arms to her, might by some chance glance, some inadvertent word, turn her from him instead of bringing her to him. Her mind was still high-fantastical, though changed in so many other ways. But all that had happened since she came to Oakley had chimed in with her humor.

The advances she had made in knowledge of her husband's surroundings, and in the favor of his family, had been of a kind that pleased and flattered her. The Curtises had been aware of no reason for modifying their criticism of her, or pretending to a liking they did not feel; but they had all "taken to" Nancy; and Lady Curtis had called her "my dear!" How haughtily would she have rejected that expression of kindness had it been applied to Arthur's wife in the old days! but as given to the young stranger at Oakley, whose looks and ways had attracted my lady, it was sweet. Yes! she had attracted them, she herself, not anything outside of her. Lucy—Lucy, indeed, had made doubtful response; but Sir John had "raved about her," and Lady Curtis called her "my dear!" These thoughts made Nancy's countenance glow.

And the three intervening days passed quickly in the excitement that possessed her: everybody seemed to know that she was going to the Hall on Saturday. The doctor's wife, who had kept aloof "till she saw what other people were going to do," called at the door in her husband's place.

ton, and left a stately card, which seemed to Matilda, when it was brought to her, much more impressive than Lady Curtis's. And kind Mrs. Rolt ran over twice a day at least, and asked what she was going to wear. "If it is wet, Sam shall drive you there, before he goes to Oakenden," she said. She was as fussy about it as if Lady Curtis had been the queen; and, indeed, she was the queen of the district, and made the laws for the neighborhood.

"You will have everybody coming to see you now," said Cousin Julia. "When Lady Curtis calls on any one, everybody goes. Yes, it is silly, perhaps; but then we think a great deal of Lady Curtis, my dear. She is very amiable, and so clever! Did you ever hear that she sometimes writes for the reviews? She does, indeed; and one must have real genius, you know, to do that; not like little bits of newspapers. And people must have some sort of rule—some will not call unless they have an introduction, and some will call on everybody. But we make Lady Curtis our rule. If she goes, we all go."

"You did not wait till Lady Curtis came," said Nancy, gratefully.

"Oh no! I don't think I could have done it. I fell in love with you the first time I saw you, my dear. I told Lucy of it directly. *So* pretty, I said (as you are, though people don't generally say it to your face like me), and quite a lady. 'Then, of course you should call. I wonder you did not call instantly,' said Lucy; and I did not lose much time, did I, Mrs. Arthur? Then, of course, I was dying to know who you were."

"You are very—very kind; but how could you know who I am? I am nobody," said Nancy, with a smile; and then she added, impulsively, "But I am so glad you thought me—a lady." When these unadvised words were out of her mouth, Nancy changed color, and grew defiant. But her horror at her own mistake was entirely turned away by Cousin Julia's soft disposition, which was well fitted to be a buckler against wrath.

"As if there could be any doubt of that!" she said. "Lady Curtis says you have such pretty manners; and Sir John! Sir John is really not himself. He thought you must be young Seymour's wife, whom I was telling you of, who made such an admirable marriage. He married one of the Glencoe family, quite a near relative of the earl, the most unexceptionable, delightful match. How we all thought of poor Arthur when young Seymour was married! But I told Sir John (now, you must not be vain, my dear, but of course one must say what one thinks), I told Sir John you were a great deal prettier than Mrs. Henry Seymour; not quite so tall perhaps, but *much* prettier. What is the matter, my dear? you turn white and you turn red!"

Here Nancy confounded her sister, who was present, and bewildered herself, and won Mrs. Rolt's tenderest sympathies by telling the merest simple truth. "When you speak of Arthur," she said, "you make me think of my husband; and—I can't help it!" she said, putting her head down on Cousin Julia's kind shoulder and bursting into a passion of tears. How touched and interested and gratified that good woman was! She insisted on taking Nancy up-stairs and making her lie down for a little. "You poor dear child!" she said, longing to ask a thousand questions, but heroically refraining; "but you must rest a little, and get back your pretty looks. You must not look pale to-morrow: I want you to look your best to-morrow." But when she came down-stairs again, it was not in human nature not to make an effort to get something out of Matilda. "She never said anything to me about her husband before," said Mrs. Rolt. "It would do her good to talk a little—not to shut up everything in her own heart, poor dear. Is it long since?" she asked, delicately. She did not know what it was, whether death or separation. The question had to be put vaguely, and Cousin Julia had a consciousness that she had put it in a very successful way.

"She will tell you herself," said Matilda. "She does not like other people to talk about it," and she opened the door with great alacrity, that the visitor might go away.

CHAPTER XLIV.

Arthur went to Durant's chambers again next morning, with a forlorn hope that something or other might have brought his friend back, without whom, it appeared to him, he did not know what measures to take. Durant had held the keys of his fortune, one way or another, and could guide him with the right thing to do, the right way to set about everything. He had never doubted that Durant would be in town, and would help him, and the first sensation in his mind was one of irritation mingled with disappointment. Of course, the only thing to be done, failing Durant, was to go to Underhayes, where he knew his friend had already gone without success. But what else was there to do? what other clue was there? At the great railway-station, where he got the train to Underhayes, it was his bad fortune to meet again with Denham, whom he had seen not very long ago in Vienna. Arthur gnashed his teeth at sight of this butterfly fluttering in his way again—no doubt to disturb his mind with some foolish buzz or other—and did his best to avoid him; but he was not a man to be avoided. He came forward with all his usual warmth of friendliness and surprise to see the other in England.

"You here, Curtis!" he said.

"You always say, 'you here,' whenever we meet," said Arthur, half annoyed, half amused, remembering so clearly the greeting which this man had given him at Paris, in the Bois. Denham was the first of his own world whom Nancy had met, and how many little mistakes and disagreements—quarrels which looked so ridiculously causeless at this distance, which might have been so easily avoided, yet which raised such rapid pulses then in their foolish young bosoms—had arisen while they were meeting him, going to the theatre with him, or resisting his invitations; for, after all, he had always been friendly, and had tried to please the bride, hard though she was to please.

"Yes, you always turn up so unexpectedly, just when one thinks you a hundred miles off. The other day you were in Vienna, and you said nothing of coming here."

"And you were the other day in Vienna, and said nothing of coming here."

"Of course, we are both the queen's servants," said Denham; "and public business, eh? consumes a great deal of our time. But do you know, Curtis, I wanted to see you? I hope I did not lead you into delusion. I told you I thought I met Mrs. Curtis on the other side of the water."

"Yes." Arthur's tone was curt and sharp; he had no intention of listening to anything about Nancy, as if it was news to him, and yet he knew so little, and would have been so thankful to hear anything from anybody! His voice sounded harsh and peremptory in its agitation.

"Meaning no offence," said Denham, with a scrap of mock humility; "but I find I made a mistake. It was at one of the stations on this line I met Mrs. Curtis; that was my blunder. I forgot till I came here to-day, when it suddenly flashed across me that it was here or somewhere near. I hope I have not caused you any anxiety."

"Not at all," said Arthur, with a blank countenance, which his diplomatic experience had taught him to wear when he chose; but then Denham was a brother of the trade, and it was scarcely worth while wasting it on him. "My —wife's family lived near. It is very natural that you should have met her hereabouts. I thought it a mistake, you may remember."

"Ah, did you? I did not recollect. I thought I might have been giving you deluding information. I hope you have good reports?"

He did not know what to say. He was a dealer in gossip, and would have given much to hear the full details of this separation, especially now when he was on the verge of half a dozen country-houses; but at the same time he did not want to worry the man, whom he was sorry for, by betraying his partial knowledge of the facts. He had made a great deal of Nancy in Paris, betraying her peculiarities, her ignorance, to many admiring listeners, and he would have liked a second chapter, which probably would have amused society still more. But he did not want to affront Arthur or wound his feelings. What could he say? Ought he to make believe that he had never heard anything? or delicately hint that there was a something, a mist of report, which he knew?

"Perfectly," said Arthur, with cold self-restraint. "I am going to her now. Her mother, to whom she was much attached, is lately dead."

"Oh, really!" said Denham; and he watched the young man's face with keen scrutiny. Fortunately, he himself was not going by the train which went to Underhayes. He accompanied Arthur to the door of his carriage, and stood there talking. "My *hommages* to Mrs. Curtis," he said: "I dare say she has forgotten me; but lay me at her feet, Curtis, all the same. One does not easily forget a face like hers; you won't mind me saying so much?"

"Oh no—surely not," said Arthur, smiling. He put himself into a corner of the train, glad to escape the other's eyes. No, there were not many such faces as hers. Then, all suddenly, her aspect as she sat in the little victoria in the Bois, that cold, bright winter day, came up before him, he could not tell how. How bright she had looked! No wonder that Denham said one did not easily forget *such a face*. Her husband had been trying to forget it for two years, and now, the moment he had suspended that effort, how it came back! And where was she, where was he to find her? How slowly the train seemed to go! Might she be visible, perhaps, somewhere on one of the crowded railway platforms which they passed, where Denham had seen her? He gazed out anxiously whenever they stopped. Why should it be Denham—Denham! who cared nothing about her—that had seen her, and not Arthur, to whom such a meeting would have been new life? This was what was called providential; but what strange mistakes—mistakes that the poorest clerk in an office would be discharged if he made—were set down to Providence! If *he* had but met her, and not Denham, what trouble might have been spared!

It was about noon when he reached Underhayes; and he went direct, remembering what Durant had written, to the shop of Raisins, the grocer. Sarah Jane was dusting her drawing-room, when her maid brought her word that a gentleman wanted to see her. It was her pleasure, and not necessity (she liked people to know this), that made her dust the drawing-room herself. Servants were negligent; they chipped the china ornaments, and were not half particular enough about the gilding; but Sarah Jane had nearly completed this self-imposed task. She put down the long feather-brush which she had been using in a corner, and took off her housemaid's gloves.

"Show the gentleman in," she said, with some grandeur; but when she saw who it was, Sarah Jane screamed out with surprise and excitement. "Arthur!" she cried. She was almost as much startled as if he had come back from the dead.

"Where is Nancy?" he said. He had got into such a state of excitement now that he forgot all preliminaries, and plunged at once into the subject which interested himself.

"Nancy? Oh, Arthur, wait a bit, I am so startled! You made my heart jump! Who ever thought of seeing you here?"

"It is not so very wonderful to see me when you reflect that my wife has been here for years. Where is she? You used to be kind and sympathetic, Sarah Jane: tell me where my wife is. Where is Nancy? There can be no reason why I should not know."

"Oh, it is so nice to see you again!" said Sarah Jane. "Such a long time you have been away—two years and a half! It is a long time. Oh, how I wish Nancy was here! I tried all I could to make her write to you when poor mother died. But she was always so self-willed, you know."

"Where is she?" said Arthur. He went up to Sarah Jane and grasped her by the arm. He was beginning to lose the little self-control he had, and his very eyes were dim with the heat of his excitement. It is impossible to believe that he really hurt her, but it pleased her to assume that he did, which came to much the same thing.

"Oh, you monster!" cried Sarah Jane. "Oh, you savage! If that is how you used poor Nancy, I don't wonder she wouldn't take any notice. Let go, or I'll call my husband! Oh, my arm! I am sure it is black-and-blue."

"Pardon me, pardon me!" said poor Arthur.

"I did not mean to hurt you, God knows; but I am almost out of my senses. My good girl, tell me where she is. I have been travelling night and day. If I am impatient, you must forgive me. Tell me, where is my wife?"

"Oh, Arthur, I am so sorry! I never thought you would take on so. Nancy might be very proud if she saw you like that. I never thought a man would mind so much, they take things so easy. Raisins never would. If I were to go and leave him, I'm sure he'd let me. Oh, don't you be afraid; I ain't so silly as to try."

Arthur had to make a violent effort to restrain himself; but it was clear she must be treated with in a more cunning way.

"Will you answer me a simple question? Do you know where Nancy is?" he said: then, with truer policy, "I will hear all about Raisins and yourself after, and you must tell me what you will like for a wedding present."

"Oh, Arthur, how kind you are! I always said you were nice. Oh, anything that *you* like, I am sure! You would be sure to choose something delightful; and we are brother and sister, ain't we, Arthur? I must give you a kiss to thank you," said Sarah Jane.

There was no harm in the kiss, and Arthur accepted it meekly. He drew a little farther off when it was over, but took her hand and held it fast.

"All that afterward," he said. "You may be sure I will do all I can to please you. But tell me first, tell me now, do you know where she is? I must hear this first. You can't tell me unless you know."

"That is just it," said Sarah Jane. "Of course, I should have told you directly. They promised to write, but they never wrote but once."

"What does *they* mean? Who was with her, and where was the letter from?"

"Don't hold me so fast—you frighten me!" cried Sarah Jane. "It was Matilda that was with her. Charley has gone to New Zealand, and Matilda is going after him; and Raisins and me, we don't know whether we mayn't follow. Don't crush my hand like that, Arthur; you hurt me! There was no date to the letter. No, I can't say that I expected to hear again just yet; five weeks—it is not so very long."

"And did not you want to write? You might have wished to see your sister again."

"In five weeks, and me married!" said Sarah Jane, naïvely. "Oh no; I knew they'd write when they wanted me, and what should I want them for? When you're in trouble, it's natural you should think of your friends; but when you're doing very nicely, and quite happy, what do you want with them? But, Arthur, to show you I'm speaking true, I'll fetch you the letter, if you will let me go; and then if you can make anything out of it— Let me go, Arthur! I promise I'll bring you the letter. Oh, please, I can't tell you any more. Let me go!"

When he did so, which he was half afraid of doing, she kept her word, and produced out of a gay little desk, lined with red, a crumpled note, with the marks of greasy fingers upon it, the sight of which gave Arthur, poor fellow! a sickening sensation. Small feelings so mingle with great that the thought that such a greasy scrap *was a relic of his wife* gave him as distinct a pang as if some great disappointment had happened to him. A lover, such as he felt himself still to be, ought to have been ready to take to his lips or his heart the meanest message that came from the beloved; but this gave him a feeling of disgust. And yet how he loved Nancy! and how his heart struggled and throbbed at the idea of finding some trace of her! It was at once a relief and a terrible disappointment to find that the greasy letter was not from Nancy at all, but from Matilda, though, as it was the fingers of Mr. Raisins and the pocket of his bride which had produced the stains upon the letter, Nancy's own autograph might have been in precisely the same condition, unprotected by the divinity that should hedge a woman beloved.

"I don't know where she means to settle, nor what we're going to do," wrote Matilda. "She's always the same hoity-toity creature as ever. She talks about a house she has heard of somewhere right in the country. I can't tell you any more; but I'll write again; and in the mean time you'll be glad to hear that I've got some very nice calico, and begun my outfit."

This was all.

"She *is* so taken up about her outfit," said Sarah Jane. "You would think nobody had ever got such a thing before. But poor Matilda was always old-maidish in her ways. Lord, Arthur! what's the matter? Have you found out anything? What a turn you did give me, to be sure!" cried Sarah Jane.

It was something which gave Arthur "a turn" too, as far as that effect can be produced upon a male subject. It was simply the post-mark "Oakenden" on the envelope of the letter. He had not seen it before, nor looked for it, being too anxious for the information inside. It startled him beyond measure now. "Oakenden!" he repeated to himself as in a dream. Something more than chance, some design which he could not fathom, some vague trembling of meaning not yet comprehensible, but tending towards light, seemed to flicker through the word. It was the post-town of *home*. He knew it as well as he knew the village at his father's park gates. What had taken her there, of all places in the world?

"Thank you!" he said, speaking, he felt, out of a mist of vague wonder and dawning hope that seemed to envelop him in an atmosphere of his own. "Thank you! I think this will be of some use. I know the place. Good-bye. I must go directly and see if they are there."

"Stop a moment," said Sarah Jane; "stop and have some dinner with us. Raisins would like to see you, and—where is the place, Arthur? I should like to know too, for one never knows what may happen, and they are two lone women with nobody to look after them. It is so different when there is a man."

"I will let you know when I have found them," said Arthur. "Good-bye; I cannot wait longer now."

"But, Arthur, do stop and have some dinner! Look here," said Sarah Jane, getting between him and the door, "do you mean to take her back? Is that what you mean?"

"Take her back?" he said, with a half-groan. "Was it I who sent her away?"

"For look here," said Sarah Jane, "I don't say you haven't a right to be angry. Raisins

would not stand the half, no, nor a tenth part, from me what you stood from Nancy. But she's not the same now. She's that proud she'll never let you see it if she can help it; but she's very changed. She can't live with her own folks now. Her and me are not such friends as we were because of that; but I suppose it will please you. She's taken to study and so forth, and she don't find her own folks good enough company. She'll be all for us, I shouldn't wonder, the moment she sees you; but don't you believe her, Arthur. It was all she could do to keep one of us as long as poor mother lived. She's as changed as possible. She's a lady, that's what she is nowadays," said Sarah Jane.

Arthur only partially heard this long speech; he had no patience with it. He watched the door, and seized his opportunity, when Sarah Jane had ended her peroration, to hasten away, waving his hand to her.

"Well, I'm sure!" she said, as he darted down the stairs; and Mr. Raisins made many jokes at dinner upon the folly of the man who left a slice of "*that* beef" to run after a rebellious wife.

"She should stay where she was, if I had her in hand," said the grocer, not without an idea that the example was a dangerous one for Sarah Jane. "You wouldn't find me leaving my dinner for her, a woman as had given me up." He did not mean that his wife should entertain any delusions in this respect. Whatever "swells" might be, grocers were not such fools.

Arthur rushed direct to the railway without losing a moment. He did not make a pilgrimage to the Bateses house, as Durant had done; he brushed past the old hair-cloth sofa standing out exposed to rain and damp at the broker's door, and was not conscious of its existence. There was a train about to start; that was all he knew. When he got back to London he drove, without losing a moment, to the other railway, and went off at the earliest possible moment to Oakenden. He arrived there late in the afternoon, with nothing, not so much as a bag, remembering nothing beyond the fact that Nancy had been there. But what could he do when he got there? He did not know how to find such a needle in that bottle of hay. The town was not large, but it was bustling and busy. It had new streets even since Arthur left home; and through what weary labor must he go before he could find the two, who might have veiled themselves in any one of five hundred new little brick houses! He took a rapid walk through the new streets in the dusk of the evening, gazing at all the parlor windows. It was not likely that fortune would answer his appeal by bringing Nancy to look out just at the moment he passed. Such a thing might happen to Denham, who had nothing to do with it, but not to him, to whom it was everything. If he had been seeking a criminal, there might have been hope for him, or had he been in one of the blessed countries where everybody has *ses papiers*. Why has not everybody *ses papiers* in England? Arthur was ready, in the heat of his feelings, to give up his birthright if that might have helped him to find his wife.

At last he bethought himself of the post-office, and pulling his hat down over his brows, and his coat-collar up over his chin, he betook himself there to see if he could find any clue. Curtis? Oh yes, there were the Curtises of Oakley, Sir John and her ladyship, the best-known people in the county; and the Reverend Hubert at the Rectory, and old Miss Curtis at Oakley Dene. In the town? Well, yes, there was a Mrs. Curtis in Acorn Terrace, No. 12; hadn't been there long; did not get very many letters. "Yes, probably that is the lady," said Arthur, his heart beating loudly.

He went off without a moment's hesitation to the little new brick terrace. It seemed to him that there could now be no doubt on the subject. He knew that Nancy would not take a false name. How unconscious she must be who was coming to her through the night; for it was quite dark now, the lamps lighted, the parlor windows shining! There was bright fire-light in the window of No. 12 Acorn Terrace, and the sound of a piano, and some one singing. Could it be *her?* He knocked, his heart sounding louder than any knocker, and was admitted with innocent confidence. Yes, Mrs. Curtis was at home; and the maid had prepared the lamp, which she carried in before him, announcing simply, "A gentleman, please, ma'am." The inhabitants made Arthur out before he made them out, and a mild old lady in a widow's cap rose from a chair by the fire. What could Arthur do but stammer forth apologies, his very voice choked with disappointment. "I beg a thousand pardons, it is a mistake," he said, rushing out again, leaving the ladies in the parlor half angry, half interested. What a blank of helplessness he felt closing round him as he got outside again, hot with shame, and quivering with the shock of his disappointment! This was no use, it was evident, and where could he go to inquire further? Not to the police, as if his innocent wife had been a culprit: he could not subject Nancy to that indignity. He walked about the streets for an hour or two longer, wondering what he could do. A directory? Her name would not be in it. The post-office had failed him; and he could not go calling her name through the streets as the Eastern princess did. Nancy! Nancy! He might make it echo to all the four winds, but what would that do for him? It occurred to him at last to try the hotels, as he remembered the date of Matilda's letter; but no ladies bearing the names of Mrs. Curtis and Miss Bates had been heard of anywhere. At one of the hotels (probably at all) they recognized him, and as he was by this time prostrate with exhaustion and disappointment, he decided to remain all night, telegraphing to his servant to meet him there next day. He must go home, now that he was so near; not to-night, but to-morrow, when he was more fit to meet strangers. Strangers! his own father and mother, his familiar friends, the servants who had nursed him from his childhood and loved him all his life; but a preoccupied mind is always unnatural. They were as strangers to him now.

CHAPTER XLV.

SATURDAY morning! very bright, but cold, a sprinkling of snow on the ground, crisp and slight like a permanent hoar-frost, the trees all

frosted, too, with edges of white, like the lights in a snow-landscape. Nancy in her blackness came out doubly distinct upon this white background, the long sweeping line of her simple dress and cloak, her face all glowing with animation and health, and repressed excitement. Pleasure, yet pain, a happy sense of having pleased, an eager, wistful longing to please more, were all mingled with the feeling that she stood on the edge of an abyss, and that nothing could excuse this deception, except the fact that it was for once, only for once, and that when that was over all should be told. She kissed her sister as she went out, which was very unusual for her. "Think of me, till I come back," she said. Nancy felt that as yet there had been no more desperate moment in her life. She was not afraid of it, and yet she was all one pulsation, all one throb. She could scarcely speak to the people she met on the road, but nodded, with a wistful sense of friendliness.

If they were all to think kindly of her, would not that support her in the present trial, and those that were still harder that must come after? For after she had done this all would be over; there would be no more excuse for staying here. She could not live under the shadow of their wing, and go on deceiving them. And she had got to be "fond" of Oakley. It was Arthur's place, where everybody knew him, and to live there was a protection to her, a shield to her imprudence, whatever happened. What else had she in the world? Even if Matilda left her, she might have gone on there, living quietly, but for that deception which she could not keep up, which she would take advantage of this once—only this once, but no more. This was one of the rare cases in which the person most immediately concerned judged herself more hardly than others did. Neither Durant nor Lucy blamed her for living here secretly; but rather were both touched by the idea that she wished, thus unknown, to recommend herself humbly to the good opinion of her husband's parents; but Nancy's simpler, straightforward mind felt the tacit falsehood of her position to be untenable. Whatever advantages it might bring her, her duty was to tell the truth, and take the consequences. She had done much that was wrong, but she had never told a lie.

Lady Curtis saw her coming from the window of the morning-room, and could not but make observations to herself upon the fine elastic figure, instinct, she felt, with some special energy, as the young stranger came up the avenue. What was it that made her walk to-day with such firm certainty and grace? Usually there was a touch of shyness about her, almost awkwardness, the awkwardness which is a kind of grace in its way, the wavering of youth, not quite sure about its own movements. But Nancy was not thinking of her appearance, or that any one was looking at her, but only of the great moment that was approaching. Lady Curtis came to the door of the morning-room to meet her, holding out her hand.

"This is my pet room, my dear," she said, smiling; "you must come here first. Sit down by the fire and get thawed, and then you shall see everything. It is not according to the present taste, but, for all that, I am fond of it. *Won't you take off your cloak?* We can put it here, or take it up-stairs with us when we go. It must be very cold out-of-doors."

"Not when one is walking," said Nancy; and as she put off her cloak a little roll of paper became visible. "I brought you the—sketches," she said, with a blush; "they are not worth calling patterns."

"They are a great deal better than patterns. *I* call them drawings," said Lady Curtis, with flattering kindness, spreading them out on the table. What pains Nancy had taken over them! and consequently they wanted the spontaneous grace of the first design, which Lady Curtis had so praised. But my lady applauded them as if they had come from the pencil of Raffaelle himself, and showed her crewels and her pieces of work executed, which filled Nancy with awe.

"Mine are not so good as these," she said, shaking her head; "I will take them back and try to do better." She was disappointed, and tears started suddenly to her eyes. But Lady Curtis took the drawings away carefully, and smiled and shook her head.

"They are mine," she said, "you have given them to me. Now look, here is my private picture-gallery, Mrs. Arthur. My son, whom you thought you had met, do you remember? You will be able to make sure by looking at his portrait; and Lucy—you know Lucy? I have been very extravagant about my children; here they are at all ages. Here is the first of my boy—and there is the last," said Lady Curtis, pointing to a framed photograph on the table. She wondered that the visitor did not move to look at it. Nancy was holding the child's miniature in her trembling hands. She could not have spoken or risen up to save her life. Look at him—she who belonged to him, to whom he belonged more than to his mother—she could not do it! There was something almost more than she could bear even in the child's face.

"The connoisseurs of the present day will have nothing to say to my pretty room," said Lady Curtis; "but perhaps you are of that way of thinking, and like darkness and neutral tints. No? I am glad of that. This is where I have spent almost all my life," she said, dropping into that tempting strain of gentle reminiscence which seems to come natural to us all when we grow old among the young, as just the other day we were young among the old, and liked to draw that soft babble of memory from elder lips. Nancy felt the charm of it, which soothed her even in her excitement, and looked up listening, with eyes that grew bigger and bigger, like the listening eyes of a child.

"I furnished it at my own pleasure, after I was married, when I came first to Oakley," she said. "Sir John does not care for these sort of things; he was always pleased when I was pleased; and all our little talks we did here; and then the children—all that they had to say to mamma, this was the place. When Arthur was a boy at school, he always came rushing in here the moment he arrived; and here they made all their plans, he and his school-friend, Lewis, who is a very dear friend still. I think I can see their little faces with the fire-light upon them," said Lady Curtis. "My Arthur! Ah, if he had always been as open with me as he was then!"

Nancy was choking with her tears. It was

all that she could do not to cry out, "It was my fault, it was my fault!" all she could do to keep herself from creeping to Lady Curtis's feet and kissing them, and crying her heart out. She sat still and kept silent, she could not tell how.

"But I must not talk of that, and make myself cry," said my lady; "that would be poor entertainment for you. All these things are presents; they have been brought me one time or another. Sir John gave me my clock; it is a genuine seventeenth-century one, and we picked it up by the merest chance. Arthur brought me that Sèvres the first time he went abroad. Come, I have upset you with my absurd talk. I can see you know what it is to be in trouble about those you love."

My lady was behind Nancy at the moment, and suddenly put her arms round her and gave her a little half-embrace. It was gratitude for her supposed feeling. Nancy stumbled up to her feet with a great cry, "Oh, my lady—my lady! if you knew! if you only knew!"

Lady Curtis looked at her fixedly, her cheek flushed a little. After all, she knew nothing of this strange young woman whom she had received so rashly. What if she should turn out to be—something not fit for the company of good women? She looked at her with a momentary suspicion.

"If there was any serious reason why you should not come into my house, I think you would not have come," she said, with meaning. Nancy did not reply; her thoughts were occupied by a wholly different preventing cause from that which was in Lady Curtis's thoughts; but neither did she quail from the look, which she did not understand. The impulse was strong upon her to tell everything, to go no further, to disclose the whole story now.

"After to-day," she said, with her lips quivering, "I meant, if you would listen, to tell you everything about me. But perhaps, I thought to myself, you would not like me then—perhaps you would be angry; and I thought I might give myself first this one day."

"Poor child!" said Lady Curtis, half smiling. "It cannot be very great wickedness, at which you think I would be angry, which you tell with such an innocent face. Hush, hush!" she added, "no more of this; here is Lucy. You shall have your day, and tell me after. Before her not a word."

Was Lady Curtis afraid of Lucy *too?* She came in looking as she always did; not suspicious, perhaps, but *as if she knew*—did she know anything?—and shook hands with Nancy. "You are showing Mrs. Arthur your own room first, mamma; you are telling her exactly what you expect to be said, and coaxing her to praise it. That is what you always do; but papa wishes her to be brought to the library. No, here he is coming after me," said Lucy, as a heavy step came towards the door. Nancy was standing up, tremulous and shaken, her lips with still a quiver in them, the tears not gone out of her eyes, when Sir John came in. He came up to her holding out his large, soft, old man's hand.

"You need not introduce me, Lucy. I know this lady already. She was very kind to me, as I told you. I assure you that to allow a young lady, and one whom I should have been so happy to serve, to take so much trouble for me, was much against my liking. But my excuse is one we must all come to, even the fairest. When a man is old—"

"I was so very glad," said Nancy, in a low tone, and her eyes, with the moisture in them, looked so appealing that Sir John's heart was touched. He gave a look round, lifting his heavy eyelids to see if there was anything visible that could account for this emotion. Then, seeing that his wife also showed signs of fellow-feeling, he concluded that the poor young widow (as he supposed her) had been telling her story to my lady's sympathetic ear.

"I believe you are going to be shown over the house," he said, offering his arm, "and you must let me show you my library myself. I have not very much," said Sir John, with that tone of mock humility which never deceives the experienced, "that is worth looking at; but there are one or two pictures, and some old Roman rubbish, which, perhaps, you may not care about. Are you fond of antiquities? I know that you are kind to them, at least," he said, giving her hand a little fatherly pat as she put it shyly on his arm. Nancy felt her head swim as she walked through the great hall leaning on Sir John's arm. He talked to her all the way, pointing out one thing and another. "This is one of our treasures—it is a bit of bass-relief found in an old temple near Rome. Have you ever been so far? Ah! then you have the pleasure to come. I think it is much better than going when you are too young to appreciate what you see. Yes, this is my favorite room. There are plenty of books, you see—a great many more than I make any use of nowadays—some of them, perhaps, are not quite lady's reading; but there are a great many which I dare say you would like, and which you will always be welcome to. This is one of the pictures we are proud of; it is a Sir Joshua. It is the portrait of my grandfather. Ah! you start—you see the likeness? It *is* very like my son. My lady has been telling you of him, no doubt. Yes, Arthur was the apple of her eye; and will be yet—and will be yet, please God."

Nancy did not hear much more. The choking of those tears she dared not shed, and those words she did not say, was more than she could bear. "Oh, please forgive me!" she said, sobbing aloud, "I can't help it. No, no, I am not ill—but it brings so many things back—"

"My dear young lady," said Sir John, alarmed, "you have got upset. Shall I take you back to Lady Curtis, or will you rest here?"

"Oh, only for a moment!" cried Nancy. The outbreak had relieved her. He made her sit down in his own great chair, and was silent for a few minutes, looking at her with serious sympathy. She was not afraid of Sir John. He (she divined) would never find her out, however she might betray herself. He was not quick like needles, like the ladies. There was safety in him. And this sense of security helped her to conquer herself. She got up presently with a smile, and said she was better. The old man was in no hurry—he was pleased with his pretty companion, and quite willing to humor her. After this, he took her all round the library, not sparing her a single relic. He had not been so much interested for ever so long. She listened to all he said with the prettiest interest, and if she did not say much, what did that matter?

"I am very ignorant," she said, to begin with, and he liked her all the better. They suited each other entirely. She did not get impatient as my lady did, or make fun of everything which Lucy would sometimes have the audacity to do; but listened with the greatest interest, as if she never could hear too much. The library was nearly exhausted when the bell rung for luncheon. "Lady Curtis will wonder what has become of us," he said, giving her his arm again, "and I am sure I have worn you out."

Meanwhile Lucy and her mother were smiling at each other. "We have no chance, you see, even with your father, against a pretty stranger," Lady Curtis said; "but I hope she is not tired of all these antiquities, as you and I are, Lucy, when we oughtn't to be."

"Oh, she will not show it," said Lucy, with a little slight, involuntary touch of scorn; but Lady Curtis did not find this sentiment out.

"Yes, she is a sympathetic young creature. She was all but crying with me about Arthur, though she can't know anything of Arthur. It may not be what hard people call quite sincere, but it is very charming and goes to one's heart."

"Oh! I did not say she was not sincere," said Lucy, with compunction; and then the luncheon-bell roused them, and they went across the hall to the dining-room, following Sir John, who issued from his library at the same moment, and led the way with his courtly old-gentlemanly politeness, leading the stranger. Age is the period in which politeness becomes most exquisite—like that *cortesia* which the old Italians make into an attribute of God himself. Sir John placed Nancy next to himself at table. She had never sat at a table so daintily served. The big, silent footmen almost filled her with awe. She had never seen anything of the kind but in the Paris hotel, which, after all, was only a hotel, served by chattering, rapid waiters, not solemn buckram men like these. Nancy was awed every moment more and more.

"Now you have had her long enough," said Lady Curtis. "She has to see the drawing-room now, and all the state-rooms."

"I hope you have had the drawing-room properly aired. I never had any confidence in that room. I have known it to be cold," said Sir John, with a look of horror. "Come back to your own room, my lady, for tea. It is the most comfortable in the house."

"That is on his own account, not ours," said Lady Curtis, as she, in her turn, led Nancy away. The drawing-room was a very large, noble room divided by pillars, and its magnificence again took away Nancy's breath. They took her all round to look at the pictures, and then my lady placed the stranger in a large chair before the fire to rest. Never had any one been so anxious about her, afraid to overtire her. Overtire her! if my lady only knew! Nancy, vigorous and young, could have carried her conductor about as easily as a child; but she could not carry the load under which she was tottering—the load of concealment, and, as she represented it to herself, deception. This overwhelmed her with a feverish incapacity. She was glad when they bade her be still. What agitation was in all her veins! and yet she was happy—wrapped in a strange, *delicious, overwhelming*, painful dream. Was it *her home, really her home in* which she was thus reposing, or a house which to-day she would leave forever? She was not able to answer the question, but sat still there, in the winter afternoon, while the sun was still shining outside, in a trance of strange and mingled sensation, lifted out of herself.

The drawing-room did not look towards the front of the house. Its large windows opened into my lady's flower-garden, a kind of fairy paradise, Nancy had thought, in which the grass was very green, and where there were still flowers. Arrivals or departures did not disturb the dwellers in this Elysian place; but as they sat together, not talking very much for the moment, for the sake of Nancy, who was "resting," some kind of indescribable wave of sound seemed to rise in the house. Something of wheels, something of quick steps, then a little distant hubbub of voices, then the ring of several doors opened and shut.

"Some one calling, I suppose," Lady Curtis said, calmly; "but you must not stir, my dear."

Lucy was near the door. What she heard that roused her curiosity, or suggested to her the improbable occurrence which had really come to pass, it would be impossible to say. Her mind was in a state of high tension and excitement, and this confers a kind of second sight and second hearing. She stole behind the great screen that guarded the room from the possibility of a draught, and softly opened the door. She heard her father's heavy step come suddenly out of his library, and then a tremulous outcry in his usually placid voice. Lady Curtis had begun to listen too.

"What is all that commotion?" she said. "Ring, Lucy, and ask."

But Lucy was out of hearing. She had rushed along the corridor to see with her own eyes, and hear with her own ears. "Yes, sir, it is I; I didn't write, for I did not know I could get here to-day. Where is my mother?" was what she heard.

Lucy's impulse was to cry out too, to rush out to the hall and throw herself upon her brother, and it took her no small effort to restrain herself. Her heart gave a wild leap into her throat, and then she turned and hurried back. What was going to happen?

"Lucy—Lucy! have you asked what is the matter?" said Lady Curtis, getting up, with natural agitation. She thought of Arthur at once, as was to be expected; but she found time, even in the tide of rising anxiety, to give a kind word to her visitor. "Never mind," she said, "don't stir; there is no need for you to disturb yourself. Lucy! where are you? what is it?" said my lady. And then she gave a half-scream, and rushed towards the door, pushing back the screen which had veiled the space before the fire.

"Yes, mother, here I am," said Arthur, coming in.

One of the party, at least, had no eyes for him, no thought for him. Lucy did not even look at her brother; and when his eye caught her standing there, and saw this, Arthur, with his arm still encircling his mother, followed instinctively to see what interest could keep his sister from him. Nancy had risen from her seat at the sound of his voice. Every tinge of color had gone from her cheeks; her eyes looked as if they had been forced wide open by a passion of won-

der which was almost agony; her lips had dropped apart. She stood motionless, gazing, but able to see nothing.

"My God!" he cried, and put his mother aside.

Sir John had followed him into the room. They were all there—all who were most interested—and all felt by instinct that something greater and stranger had happened than Arthur's coming home.

"What is it, what is it?" cried Lady Curtis, in sharp tones of pain.

Her son made but one step away from her, and caught their unknown visitor, their strange neighbor, the young woman they had all been so kind to, in his arms.

"No, no, no!" they all heard Nancy cry, shrill and high in terror or anguish, they could not tell which; and then she dropped out of his arms in a heap upon the floor.

"Have I killed her?" he said, looking round upon them with a scared and blanched face, while Sir John and his mother looked at him, speechless with astonishment.

"No, no," cried Lucy, who had possession of her senses; "it is no worse than fainting. Oh, don't you see, don't you see what it is, all of you? She has scarcely been able to keep from telling you."

"What had she to tell me? What do you mean? What is this? what is this, Lucy? I don't understand."

Arthur had one arm under his wife's head.

"She is better, she is coming back!" he cried, and stretched out his other hand, with one glance round. "Mother, God bless you! You have been keeping her here safe while I have been looking everywhere for her," he said. "If I had not owed you everything before, I should owe you my life now!"

"Arthur! What has he to do with her? Her name is—ah!" Lady Curtis ended with a great cry.

And Sir John, who was altogether puzzled, came forward a step and looked at her where she lay, holding up his spectacles solemnly in his hand.

"I am afraid she has fainted," he said. "I thought she was not very well. It will be better to leave your mother and a maid to manage her, Arthur. We are interested in the young lady, but we are more interested in you."

Nancy came to herself as he spoke, and, struggling up, got upon her knees.

"I did not faint," she said, hoarsely; "only the light went from me. I did not mean to deceive any one. I said just this one day—I wanted to see you, and Arthur's home. I did not mean to deceive you. If you please, I will go away, and never trouble you any more."

"Nancy!" cried Arthur, "Nancy!" He put his arm round her, holding her. He had been kneeling beside her while she lay there, and he was not aware of the suppliant attitude which accident made him assume. "Look at me," he said, "look at *me!* If you cared for Arthur's home, did you not care for *me*, Nancy? You shall never go away, except with me!"

Nancy got up hastily, drawing herself away from him. She was at the turn of her capricious soul. Would she burst away again—rush out into the cold and the twilight? Everything hung on the impulse of the moment. She gave a wild look round upon all those agitated faces. Sir John had put on his spectacles, the better to understand the extraordinary position of affairs which had begun to dawn upon him now.

"It appears to me," he said, slowly, "if I understand, that there can be no question here of going away—no more for this young lady than for any of us. Is it possible—I do not mean to be uncivil, but you will excuse the question—is it possible that you are, as I understand, my son's wife?"

Nancy was caught at the moment of doubt. She herself turned and looked at Arthur. Her eyes softened, her paleness began to glow. He drew her arm within his, and she did not resist.

"Yes," she said, with a long, soft sigh. It was hardly possible to tell which was the word, and which the lingering flutter of breath.

"Then, my dear, though I have forgotten your name," said the old gentleman, going up to her, taking her disengaged hand, and kissing her very solemnly on the forehead, "you are very welcome in his father's house."

"And me?" said Lady Curtis, with a little moan. Grammar and emotion do not always go together. "I have only half seen Arthur, and must I turn all at once to Arthur's wife?"

"If you care for me, mother—!"

"*Care* for you! Do you hear how he blasphemes—you, young woman, that are his wife? And he was my little boy, my child before he ever saw you. Care for him! that is what he calls it," the mother said, crying, yet smiling, too, as her manner was. "What is your name? Nancy! Yes, I know it well enough; I only ask it out of contradiction. Here is my kiss, Nancy. I did not know you were my daughter, but I liked you; and that is better than giving you a kiss only for his sake. If you care for him, as he calls it, you will like me too. Where is Lucy all this time, who was in the plot—half knew—"

"I only divined," said Lucy, coming forward in her turn.

But Lucy was the one of all whose salutations were the least cordial. She was glad, but she did not like it, somehow. She did not like to hear my lady say "my daughter." That was an unexpected stab. She went through her salutations very prettily, but in such a way as brought the excited party back to common life.

"And I think you will find your own room more comfortable," said Sir John; "and you are surely later than usual this afternoon, my lady, in having tea."

This tea, it may be supposed, was not the tranquillizing draught it usually proved to these agitated people; and it was a relief to everybody when it was settled that Arthur should walk down with his wife to the village to tell her sister of the extraordinary event which had happened, and to make arrangements for Nancy's removal to the Hall. They went out into the dark avenue together, arm-in-arm, glad of the darkness, and feeling it had been made for them, as, if it had been morning and bright, they would have felt that to have been made for them. To repeat what they had to say to each other is none of our business. People do not meet again after such separations without having in their happiness pain enough to make them humble; and

yet that walk down to the village in the wintry evening was worth some pain. Sir John was still standing between the two rococo cupids of the mantel-piece, with his cup in his hand, when they went away. He had come back to the ordinary habits of his life, which, after any disturbance, it is always a pleasant thing to do.

"It seems to me," he said, "that it was a very fortunate thing we got hold of Arthur's wife accidentally, and found her to be so unexceptionable a person, before we knew who she was; and it was pretty that she called herself Mrs. Arthur. I did not perceive it just at first, but of course it was her right name. And, all things considered, I think we may be very thankful to Providence, my lady, that things have turned out so well," said Sir John, putting down his cup, and going slowly away, as was his wont. When the door was closed, which he always did so carefully, my lady caught Lucy by the waist, who was going away too.

"My darling," she said, "we must strike while the iron is hot, while your father is so satisfied. Go this moment, and write before the post goes. Tell Lewis to come at once—to-morrow; he ought not to lose a day."

"Shall I, mamma?" Lucy crept a little closer to her mother, who was not forgetting her, after all.

"Yes, at once. I hate them all!" cried Lady Curtis, with a little outburst, "taking my children from me. But I suppose you will be happier; and you know, as Arthur says, I do care —a little—for *you*."

THE END.

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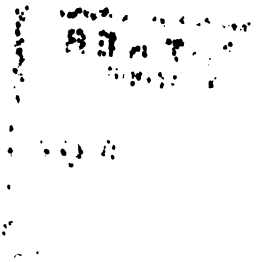

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